Fan Fictions – Victorian Celebrity Novelists and Their Contemporary Defenders: Reimagining Henry James and Lewis Carroll

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Abstract:
If we love the work of a writer whose politics, personal behaviour and character can be shown to be alarming, disgusting or dangerous – if she, he (or they) is racist, anti-Semitic, misogynist, a child-molester or an advocate of selective murder – should we continue to admire their prose? This is the central question that has preoccupied my thinking about neo-Victorian biographical fictions. In this essay, I examine the tensions between three modes of writing: history, biography, and fiction and address the question of neo-Victorian critical ethics. I then proceed to discuss two biographical fictions of Victorian writers, written at the beginning of the twenty-first century in very different literary registers. The first text is Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), which dramatises the later writing years of Henry James. The second text is Kate Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me* (2001), which reinterprets the relationship between Charles Dodgson, the Oxford don who became Lewis Carroll, and his child Muse, Alice Liddell. Neither of these novels were consciously written as neo-Victorian biographical fictions, yet both address the question of biographical ethics and judgements. Do we write to defend the writers we love against all comers, or to judge them in the light of contemporary morals and literary aesthetics? Or are we simply rewriting them in our own image?

Keywords: Alice Liddell, biographical fiction, bodies, critical ethics, fanfiction, Henry James, history, Lewis Carroll, presentism, resurrection.

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I wish to declare an interest. I have written two historical novels set in the Victorian period, which are now described as neo-Victorian biofictions. This is not how the first novel was conceived when I began writing the book in 1991. I was still wrestling with the fact that I was not born a woman, but became one, and was wondering how to get out of it. My first novel to address a Victorian life was *James Miranda Barry* (1999): the tale of a Victorian celebrity, the famous colonial doctor, rumoured in some quarters to have been in fact a woman, but in my own fiction, a transgendered gender transgressor.

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That novel was not born a neo-Victorian biographical historical fiction but became one.

Sophie and the Sibyl (2015), however, was quite self-consciously written as a neo-Victorian novel, in the awareness that this particular genre has a literary history and an associated developing body of academic criticism. I decided to settle my scores with the Victorian writer I most admire, cherish, re-read and adore: Marian Evans Lewes, better known, but during her life in this world never addressed or described except in letters, as George Eliot. Throughout *Sophie and the Sibyl*, I named her as she was known in her lifetime: Mrs Lewes, Marian, Polly, or the Sibyl. All those names died with her, for it is only after her death in 1880 that she sheds them all and is known as the writer we remember – George Eliot. George Eliot herself, both the woman and the writer, remains my heroine in this fiction, and my cherished celebrity novelist.[1]

I have often wondered what links these two life stories. Neither character chooses the life she or he might have had as an ordinary woman, and both of them adopted male identities. Barry may not have been a woman at all; indeed, he probably never was entirely female, and George Eliot was famous for being both hideous and clever – that is to say, not what a Victorian woman ought to be. She educated herself well beyond the level required for the role of wife and mother, and as a committed atheist she wasn't devoted to Victorian piety. This may have been true of her life, but in her art she sold moral duty and Christian values to her readers with dreadful zeal. James Miranda Barry and Marian Evans Lewes both took risks and chose 'the road not taken'. They became remembered celebrities by being, thinking and living outside the norms of Victorian lives. And they are often discussed as if they were oddballs, scandals, freaks.

1. The Fascinations of Neo-Victorian Biofiction

Neo-Victorian writers are fascinated by freaks, both the people who actually worked as freaks and the people who were considered by polite society to be freaks. Here, I am thinking of Carol Birch's *Orphans of the Carnival* (2016), which reimagines the life of Julia Pastrana, or the Ape Woman, and the numerous versions of the life of Joseph Merrick, also known as the Elephant Man.[2] Any scholar involved in Disability Studies has a wealth of material to discuss. Even numerous neo-Victorian lesbian narratives describe the lesbian as a perceived freak. The BBC/HBO 2019 version of the life of Anne Lister,

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created by Sally Wainwright, represents Gentleman Jack as the lesbian who gets away with it,[3] largely because she was upper-class and rich. The neo-Victorian obsession with freaks is neither surprising nor strange. The best fiction deals with extraordinary people in ordinary situations or ordinary people in extraordinary situations. Historical fiction writers have always been drawn to extraordinary people in extraordinary situations. And in my reading experience, you write about ordinary people in ordinary situations at your peril. This is now the natural home of reality TV, clearly aimed at so-called ordinary people and adored by wide sections of the public, though I think it is very hard to make those narratives interesting. But do we actually read fiction to discover representations of ordinary lives? Surely, we want to see what makes these lives extraordinary, memorable, unusual, strange?

What then is the point of writing a biographical historical fiction? Why would a novelist want her or his imagination limited by inconvenient biographical facts, some of which are bound to be very ordinary indeed? I am not using any short cuts in the descriptive terminology – biographical, historical, fictional – because none of these words sit comfortably together. A biography is not a novel. And history is not fiction. Well, not officially. But both biographers and historians are given to speculation and even to reproducing imaginary dialogue. Ancient historians, such as Thucydides and Josephus, often wrote out great men's great speeches. But this largely fictional practice ended with the professionalisation of the discipline of history in the nineteenth century.

I think we all recognise the troubled waters where the three streams, biography, history and fiction, meet and overlap – and some of us think they shouldn't do so. Perhaps, rather than thinking in terms of rules and conventions, we could investigate the question by thinking about the reader's expectations. What does the reader expect from a biography? A reader would probably think that the biographer has a duty to abide by the known and proven facts of the life of her/his or their chosen subject, and to situate that subject in the appropriate historical context. Most readers pick up a novel to be entertained. And I do think that a novelist's primary duty is to entertain the reader, but a serious writer will wish to master the form of the novel that the writer has chosen to use. All biographers, historians and novelists, however, select their material. But they often do it differently and for different reasons. A biographer should address, indeed often relishes, inconvenient facts or contradictory evidence. Fiction can and often does distort or discard the facts

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and the evidence, delighting some readers and infuriating others. Both history and biography attempt to provide plausible explanations to fill the gaps left in the documentary record. But a novelist invades, exploits and enjoys the inevitable hiatus left by time. And we don't necessarily have to be plausible. All we have to do is what every novelist has to do – whatever their subject or chosen genre – persuade and convince. All biographers speculate, and these speculations are often their most contentious pieces of interpretation. A novelist is expected to imagine, suggest, and invent. And it is, in my view, not a freedom that we should abandon. But all three kinds of writing – biography, history, fiction – exploit the 'What if?' elements of possibility. The radical difference between these forms and registers of writing is located in the reader. What are the reader's demands and expectations? We don't read history and fiction in the same way, or for the same reasons.

Can we learn anything significant about a writer's work from the life, or the story of that writer's life? Yes, sometimes. Can we learn anything important about them from their work? Yes, but again only sometimes. We can make certain deductions about how they think. And while we can speculate, we cannot know. The past sometimes proves to be a locked door.

2. Scholarship vs Ethics, Fanfiction, and Fictional Resurrections

In the academic literature of neo-Victorian studies, I have noticed a deep concern with the 'ethics' of biographical fictional writing. I have to admit I find this puzzling because, in British law, you cannot libel the dead, although you can upset their descendants. And maligning the dead cannot be described as an evil neo-Victorian invention. In her excellent essay on neo-Victorian versions of Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell, Charlotte Boyce notes "the potential for biofictional invention to generate problematic extra-textual repercussions" (Boyce 2020: 76-77). The problem in question appears in Gaynor Arnold's version of the relationship between the writer and the child – Carroll and Liddell – whom she disguises behind pseudonyms, in her novel *After Such Kindness* (2012). The inference of paedophilia could also be applied to Alice's father, Henry Liddell, "a supposition that threatens to stain the character of an historical person with no recourse to redress" (Boyce 2020: 77).[4] Henry Liddell (1811-1898) might be better known as Alice's father, but he was also a distinguished classics scholar who produced an important Greek Lexicon with co-author Robert Scott. This monumental work, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, first published by Oxford University Press in 1843, is still

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popularly known as 'Liddell and Scott'. I have a copy behind me in the room where I write, as I used this dictionary when I was learning Greek. Can Henry Liddell's reputation survive an unproven slur on his character offered by a minor neo-Victorian novelist one hundred and fourteen years after his death? And should we be distressed and enraged by this dilemma? Or have we lost all sense of proportion? Boyce is absolutely right, however, in her assertion that "neo-Victorian biofiction sculpts contemporary perceptions of past figures and brings modern value-judgements to bear on Victorian lives" (Boyce 2020: 77). But don't biographers and historians all do exactly the same thing, albeit with somewhat different intentions and using different methods?

What I think is in play here is the emotional investment many readers have in the writers they admire. If we are serious readers we are fans, fans of the fictions we love, and we may want fan fictions in return. And that may amount to whitewashing the writers about whom we care. Whitewashing is a term used by contemporary publishers when they spot an author losing his/her or their nerve, softening the edges of an unpleasant character or refusing to malign them. Unfortunately, whitewashing makes for ludicrous stories and obsequious, ingratiating prose. Ironically, in the Victorian period it was often the authors themselves, and not only the publishers, who lost their nerve. Charlotte Brontë defended her sister Emily in a backhanded way, excusing, rather than celebrating the violent truth of Heathcliff's character in her Preface to *Wuthering Heights* (1847): "Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is" (Brontë 1995: liii). Most of us now think otherwise.

Fanfiction (sic) is largely an internet phenomenon and according to the definitions offered by the websites it is fiction, written by fans, that is, admirers of the original work.[5] Fanfiction writers adopt many of the original characters in the works they rewrite and sometimes add new ones. Fanfiction also encourages 'crossovers' – that is, inventing a new combination of several original stories. The most popular stories vulnerable to these practices are mass-market fictions. The Harry Potter and Twilight series generate enormous fanfiction websites. The other major source are films with cult followings: *Star Wars*, Peter Jackson's adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and George R.R. Martin's fantasy novel sequence *A Song of Ice and Fire*, better known through its HBO franchise as *Game of Thrones*. From one point of view, fanfiction looks like a harmless, mildly infantile

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practice, indulging the fantasies of emerging writers who have yet to invent their own characters and their own stories. But from another point of view fanfiction steers a dangerous course between two possibilities. The fanfictions might well generate an energetic satirical take on the original work, or bring a perceptive incarnation of a subtext, suggested but not stated, into the fictional light of day. But the fanfiction stories can also be read as derivative, parasitic, and offensive – and in breach of copyright.[6] The same things could be said of much neo-Victorian fiction, although most of the adapted or appropriated material is now safely out of copyright.

If we love the work of a writer whose politics, personal behaviour and character can be shown to be alarming, disgusting, or dangerous, if, for example, the writer is racist, anti-Semitic, misogynist, a child-molester or an advocate of selective murder, should we continue to admire their prose? This is a vexed and complex intellectual terrain, in which the reader's invested emotions tend to erupt and overflow. And it is my view that we should not, indeed cannot, confuse the teller with the tale. I too, in my time, have occupied the moral high ground of feminist condemnation, simply because I do not enjoy reading writing which calls for me, forced into my identity as a woman, to be exploited, underpaid, despised, raped, bullied, or killed.

A secondary element in the mulch of neo-Victorian prose and its critical commentators is the demand for political correctness, or what are now popularly known as 'woke' attitudes. This is a demand that usually undermines fan fictions. There is a school of academic literary criticism which argues that neo-Victorian fiction should be engaged in righting the wrongs of the past rather than digging for salacious bestseller sexual scandals. The call for papers to this special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* suggests that an acceptable investigative approach would be to discuss "the differential canonisation and depreciation of author figures (in terms of race, ethnicity, class, (trans)gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, etc." (see http://neovictorianstudies.com/).[7] Neo-Victorian writers should therefore employ narrative strategies which valorise the marginal, the discredited, the outcast. We should lend our voices to the voiceless, the invisible, the people who have been silenced. If you have been trampled by history, colonial and otherwise, you should be able to find your champion, who will be your advocate and will tell your story.

Is one of the purposes of the neo-Victorian project in all its forms to do justice to the ignored, marginal subjects who were victims of oppression?

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Of course, they *can* be brought back, given a voice, resurrected and celebrated. These things certainly are a possible part of the neo-Victorian project that might engage the passions of liberal-minded writers. But why should they be obliged to do so? And why should these literary agendas be prescribed as necessary critical medicine by academic critics? My point here is that some great art is spectacularly perverse, distressing, and offensive in contemporary political terms. I find work such as Vladimir Nabokov's classic, *Lolita* (1955), quite un-re-readable – I have read it once and that will have to do – but the book's status is not in question. I would never deny its importance; nor would many other critics. A French writer has recently retold the tale from the point of view of the silenced victim of underage rape. A reimagining of *Lolita* from the child's point of view, *Journal de L (1947-1952)* (2019), was written by French journalist and writer Christophe Tison.[8] Some people cannot, in all conscience, listen to anything composed by Wagner. J.M. Coetzee's Booker Prize-winning novel, *Disgrace* (1999), which is unrepentantly racist and misogynist, nevertheless, in my view, deserved the prize. And of course, we have the right to engage in nuanced argument. I denounced Coetzee at some length in my own book on contemporary fiction, *Writing on the Wall*,[9] but I never denied the quality and power of his prose on the grounds that what he actually had to say was unacceptable to me. The power of his prose was precisely the element that made his work so persuasive and so dangerous.

To me, the problem is clear. Scholars in the grip of a political agenda, and with no other criteria of value, are usually not intelligent readers. They seldom talk about genre, form, style, method, language, literary traditions or even the quality of the writing. They never descend to the grammar of the text. They are simply engaged in a form of 'tick-box, content criticism' that should be of little interest to anyone, except other academics who share their simplistic, self-righteous views. We, as academic literary critics, should not descend into becoming the 'thought police'. If we do, we are not doing our job. All writing involves judgement and selection. I will continue to defend the right of every writer, in any age, to give offense.

I quite understand that conscientious historians, working within a discipline that is based on evidence, might well feel that they need to adhere to an ethical professional structure similar to the one outlined by Hilary Mantel. This is what Mantel says in reply to a query put to her by a

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neo-Victorian biofiction writer, Miranda Miller, about the writer's duty to the biographical fictional subject:

> I think you owe them the same respect a biographer shows, or a historian. So you put the work in: that's the main thing. You should only make guesses on the basis of the best evidence you can get […]. But you must beware of the corrupting power of empathy, and keep going back to the evidence. I suppose my own method is, imagine grudgingly, imagine sparingly, but imagine thoroughly. (Mantel qtd. in Miller 2019: 162)

I am a great admirer of Mantel's Tudor historical fictions, and I appreciate the fact that she wishes to write with the same authority as a biographer or a historian, but it is my view that this is not necessarily how you tell good stories or write good fiction. The question at issue here is the legitimate limits placed on the imagination. Mantel wishes to keep the imagination within strict borders when dealing with an historical subject. I would rather let the mind run free. Katie Roiphe, in the Afterword to her suggestive and beautifully written book on the relationship between Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell, *Still She Haunts Me,* unapologetically states, "I have altered geography, chronology and history where it served the purposes of the novel" (Roiphe 2001: 225). Here, fiction trumps biography and history. Roiphe runs up her flag, and I agree with her. Fiction should be at the service of the reader and the story.

Historical biographical novelists are resurrection men (sic).[10] We unearth the bodies that are lost and reanimate them in our fictions. Conjure up the thinking, breathing body, the voice, the glance, the physical presence of the person, the person the reader desires to meet: that's what fiction can do in extraordinary ways. A problem then immediately surfaces – how do we read that lost body in order to reanimate and reinterpret its desires and decisions? In the case of *James Miranda Barry,* the body itself is the site of speculation and dispute which arises from the initial gender-bender question – was he a woman or a man?[11] The more important question for me was this: what kind of mind decided that the life Barry chose – and as a child he is unlikely to have chosen it for himself – could only be lived as a man? For, of course, it did matter. When Barry trained to be a doctor in Edinburgh in 1810, women could not train to be doctors. But whoever or whatever he was, Barry

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chose and continued to choose independence, freedom, and adventure. He lived his life as he wanted to do. And he got away with it.

In the case of George Eliot, I asked a slightly different question, which has far-reaching implications for the kind of biographical fiction you can write. How do I, as a writer, represent another writer if I think that the most important thing about her or him is the writing itself and the quality of the work? Endless scenes of a writer sitting at a desk or a table make for very, very boring fiction. Literary biographies, and by that term I mean historical accounts of writers' lives, therefore tend to concentrate on the apparent *sources* of the subject's writing: childhood, homes, families, traumas, landscapes, mentors, teachers, love affairs, or, in the case of George Eliot, religious fights and hopeless romantic crushes on older or much younger men. But I want to pursue another line of enquiry that tends to surface in neo-Victorian fiction: does the art of the writer justify the sacrifices, sometimes the waste of whole lives, that have been laid at its feet? Is that writer good enough to justify the sacrifice? I should say that these are the only ethical issues that keep me awake at night. Who paid the price and was it worth it?

3. Resurrecting the Sexual Paranoias of Henry James

I will now turn to two concrete examples, both published at the beginning of the twenty-first century, before the neo-Victorian critical boom took hold in the academic world. Both novels are biographical fictions written in completely different registers. The writers represented are Henry James and Lewis Carroll.

Colm Tóibín's classic work of biographical fiction, *The Master* (2004), is a portrait of Henry James. The novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won numerous awards.[12] Tóibín begins, not with James's celebrity, but with his spectacular moment of failure: the disastrous first night of his play *Guy Domville* in 1895. By choosing to portray James at the moment of discouragement and failure, and just before the last great period of his writing life, Tóibín builds a strange homage into the fiction. James was about to write *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), *The Awkward Age* (1899), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Henry James possessed courage and persistence, qualities that were about to turn failure into triumph and lead into gold. Tóibín's portrait of a writer makes the conditions necessary for writing central to the narrative. Those conditions will be

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different for each writer; James's strategies of presence and absence, his refusal to commit himself to anything or anyone, all involve putting himself first. His house at Rye becomes a lair, from which he emerges to observe. This was his advice to all writers: "Observe perpetually" (James qtd. in Woolf 1972: 365).[13] James embodies the writer as spy.

The novel is not only a psychological portrait of a writer famous for his irony, ambiguity and evasiveness, but also an analysis of the loneliness of a homosexual man incarcerated in the closet. This is a novel about the way in which the writer sees the world, not how the world sees him. Tóibín follows James's point of view, but doesn't use first-person narrative, thus keeping a wise, critical distance. The Oscar Wilde trial is one of the central public events described at the beginning of the novel, and there is a gripping exchange between James and the writer and critic Edmund Gosse, who appears to have been another closet case. Gosse implies that James might also have been carrying on with rent boys. He would therefore be at risk of accusations that he too was "an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort" (Forster 1972: 139). And yes, moving and gripping as this novel is, I think it presents a very sympathetic whitewash of a life of anxieties and paranoias. The life of Henry James could be read quite differently. James was a man full of silences and secrets. Secrets are the lifeblood of Victorian fiction. So, to return to my earlier question: who gets sacrificed to the art of Henry James?

Well, she was another writer, and her name is Constance Fenimore Woolson. Now, all I ever knew about Constance before I began to unearth her life and work from beneath the grim shadow of Henry James was that she was a successful and innovative American writer, devoted to James, and his most astute reader. She is also reputed to be the inspiration for his famous heroine Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), and it is said that she killed herself when James let her down by refusing to spend the winter near her in Venice. She is sometimes portrayed as the ultimate fag-hag, a heterosexual woman who trailed around after a homosexual man, hoping for attention and favours, the devoted but deluded handmaiden of misogyny. The really extraordinary story is what happened to her dresses when she was dead. It fell to James to dispose of them. He rowed out to the centre of the lagoon in Venice, aided by her gondolier, and tried to drown the dresses. Unfortunately, the vast skirts returned to the surface as black, soaking balloons. The body that had once inhabited them is gone. The clothes remain, as an appalling reminder of a physical presence that James had already repudiated.

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The biographer Hermione Lee reviewed *The Master* in *The Guardian*, and she too rehearses this story. She also insists on the supremacy of the biographical agenda when she writes: “How the books grew out of the life is the novel’s deepest story” (Lee 2004: n.p.). Tóibín is too reverent towards the facts of James’s life to tinker with the selective trajectory he has chosen to dramatise. But he does give Constance Fenimore Woolson a body, a voice, and a subversive talent for caustic observations. While staying at Bellosguardo, above Florence, where she befriended Francis Boott and his daughter Lizzie, Constance notices that the rooms in their household are exact duplicates of Gilbert Osmond’s delicate arrangements in *The Portrait of a Lady*. This is her reaction as it is recounted in Tóibín’s novel:

> Sometimes, she said, when the father and daughter spoke it was as though Gilbert Osmond and his daughter Pansy were having a conversation. “You have introduced me to two of the characters from your books,” she wrote, “and I am grateful to you, but I wonder if you have plans to include me in the sequel.” (Tóibín 2004: 235)

James, in Tóibín’s portrait, allows his irritation to show and clearly suggests that the “discussion of sources for his novels” must remain in the realm of the “unspoken” (Tóibín 2004: 235). This fictional version of James closely resembles what we know of the historical figure. Henry James liked to listen and observe, but he did not like being observed too closely by another’s eyes.

Most rational people who do not live in the public eye, or seek celebrity of any kind, will, upon finding themselves portrayed in other people’s novels, be angry, outraged, and insulted. They will view the fact, if it can be proved, as a form of identity theft. The recreation of a living person is rightly perceived to be an uncanny intrusion upon another’s privacy, even a form of witchcraft, an eerie stealing of faces, voices, bodies. This is because you are being interpreted, overwritten, remade. And it is a common reaction to all three streams of writing that I drew together earlier on: history, biography, fiction. The electric tension between human being, the embodied past, and the documented interpretation can never be avoided, nor suppressed.

In Tóibín’s novel, Constance’s family trust James to go through her papers and manuscripts. He sets about burning every scrap of evidence that links his life to hers. His relationship with a woman who was his intellectual

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equal reveals James to be a monster of egotism and selfishness, who envied his supposed great friend her commercial success. He denies her at every turn, even to his friends. As she says bitterly at one point in the novel, "being partly invisible is merely a small part of my charm" (Tóibín 2004: 247). But my hostile interpretation is not the obvious reading of James's character and motives. Tóibín saturates James in what appear to be excessive and unnecessary feelings of guilt at Constance's death. He lets James off the hook.

Other writers were not prepared to allow James to get away with cruelty and neglect quite so easily. Another woman writer, Anne Boyd Rioux, in her biography of Constance Fenimore Woolson, reclaims Constance's life and writing from beneath the larger shadow cast over them by James. She boldly subtitles her biography, published in 2016, *Portrait of a Lady Novelist*, an act that subverts the vexed relationship to James. Boyd Rioux dedicated her biography to the members of the Constance Fenimore Woolson society (see Boyd 2016). The writer whom James discarded has therefore found her own fans and her contemporary champion and defender.

Tóibín also elides the suggestive and unsettling question of James's interest in children. The most terrifying tale of child sexual abuse, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898),[14] is wonderfully concealed inside a fashionable horror story of a haunted house. There are many Victorian writers, painters, photographers, even art critics, whose interest in children is a symphony of sinister perversion. The allegedly guilty parties who fascinate me most are: Henry James, J.M. Barrie, the writer who created Peter Pan, and Lewis Carroll. Their fascination with children is either overtly sexual, or salacious enough to make a modern reader uneasy, perhaps even scandalised. And, crucially, they will not allow their child characters to grow up or to grow old.

4. Sexual Phantoms: Alice Liddell and Lewis Carroll

This brings me to Katie Roiphe's 2001 novel, *Still She Haunts Me,* her version of the story of Charles Dodgson, also known as Lewis Carroll, and Alice Liddell. Roiphe raises some of the central problems that bedevil neo-Victorian biographical fiction and the representation of the writer. The first problem is that great sin, commonly condemned by historians, called 'presentism'. Presentism is the uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes, especially the tendency to interpret and to judge past actions and events by the standards of modern values and concepts. Not a useful tool, I would have

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thought, in interpreting or imagining the past and past lives. Or is it, in fact, unavoidable?

In her article 'Presentism's Useful Anachronisms',[15] the medieval historian Miri Rubin notes that the term is generally applied to "historians who acknowledge the impact of ethical considerations on their work" and who use conceptual frames like feminism, Marxism, and post-colonialism: "The presentist is thus accused of being a confuser of categories, an offender whose crime is the historian's cardinal sin: anachronism" (Rubin 2017: 237). In defence of the practice of presentism, she argues that historians – and I would include writers of historical or neo-Victorian fiction – are unavoidably 'presentist' and should be so consciously, since it is only through "the engaged use of concepts and posing of ethical questions" that history (or, I would add, historical fiction) "does justice to the past and is accountable in the present" (Rubin 2017: 238).

All historical fiction is in danger of patronising the past, and the Lewis Carroll/Alice Liddell relationship is especially fraught because we lack a sensibility that could ever regard that friendship as innocent. Most contemporary readers, when considering the famous 'golden afternoon' when grown men entertain little girls on a riverbank and tell them stories of rabbit holes, talking caterpillars, drugs that change your body shape, and red queens devoted to beheadings, would assume that they were looking at a crime scene. Roiphe uses the characters' real names and researched Dodgson's life carefully. But she puts biographical fact at the service of her plot and her fictional strategies.

Some writers hedge their bets by cheating, as does Gaynor Arnold. Arnold's reconfiguration of Carroll and Alice as 'John Jameson' and 'Daisy Baxter' mirrors the layered identities of Charles Dodgson/Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell/Alice in Wonderland. But even as she gives the pair different names, she insists on who they really are. The hardback cover shout-line declares that the novel is "inspired by Lewis Carroll and Alice". Thus, the biographical fiction is masked by a false layer of pseudonyms, but endorsed by that eternal and ubiquitous lure, 'based on a true story'. The publishers have to do this. Otherwise why would we bother to read the novel at all? The lived material reality of the characters not only endorses the authenticity of the fiction, but also insists on their claim to our attention.[16]

There is a formal element in many neo-Victorian fictions that captures and enchants contemporary audiences, and that makes the neo-Victorian

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project in all its genres so commercially successful, and that is the return to the pleasures of the plot. Plot has been demoted and disdained by many literary writers, for whom complex textures in language, or even postmodern trickery are more important. But, interestingly, plot is an element that simply doesn't exist in real lives. Biographies cannot have plots, although they can, must, and do have narratives. Thus, one of the jobs a commercially attentive neo-Victorian biofiction writer has to do is cook up a plausible plot.[17]

The narrative of a life will, of course, describe decisions with consequences, actions, events, but fiction generates patterns and shapes. Real lives are usually governed by luck and chance. Unless you believe in Divine Providence, in which case God is in control of the plot, most of us are living in our very own Thomas Hardy novel, that is, a meaningless sequence of accidents, coincidences and disasters, often with a tragic end. The irony is that Hardy mobilises a malign Providence who stalks our every step. So how can we write a biographical fiction that does not distort or sacrifice veracity, or at least a recognisable version of real events, and combine those events with a meaningful plot?

Plot is a mechanism which drives the action of fiction. It is helpful to think of plot not just in terms of conspiracy, mystery, and secrets, but in terms of a knot that must be untied and a structure that must be resolved. Plot is always linked to action and event. The plot can be both a prison and a trap. The plot must have an end, because it creates the limits of the action. And the plot must carry an electric charge, an urgency that drives the action towards its conclusion, so that the characters can be released, their stories ended.

The first, general rule is this: be selective. Choose part of the life that can be shaped into a plot.[18] Roiphe decides to centre her plot on the exclusion of Dodgson from the Liddell household, the rift that occurred in the last days of June, 1863. She begins her novel with the fatal note from Alice's mother: "*It is no longer desirable for you to spend time with our family*" (Roiphe 2001: 1, original italics). The questions she raises in the reader's mind are simple and probably already there. What happened? Why was Dodgson separated from Alice? Did he interfere with her? Was he too close to her? What made Mrs. Liddell suspicious? There is a gap in the documented sources. Dodgson destroyed parts of his diary dealing with the incident, whatever it was. Later, as an adult, Alice regretted the fact that her mother burned all Dodgson's letters written to her when she was a child. Why did her mother burn the

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letters? What did these letters contain that was compromising, incriminating, or scandalous?

We should take note of these bonfires of incriminating or compromising letters, which occur not only in the biographical fictions, but also in the material literary world. Events or behaviour that once seemed scandalous, so dangerous that were the story known it could destroy a writer's reputation, might now not even make us blink. The evidence may be incinerated, but the space liberated by the elimination of the evidence might be occupied by our imaginations. And instead of the innocent affection of an Oxford don for a child, we might imagine unspeakable things.

Roiphe's fiction answers all the questions concerning the inner feelings, emotions, and motives of Dodgson and Alice that neither history nor biography can legitimately ask, let alone provide the answers. The child Alice demanded that her story should be written down. And Charles Dodgson became Lewis Carroll and made his version of Alice immortal. What did the real Alice Liddell ever do that might enable her name to live forever? It is her connection to Lewis Carroll that has kept her name alive. She occupied one of the most suspect and ambiguous roles a woman, even a woman who is still a child, can ever occupy in a writer's life. She became his Muse.

The Muses were the nine Greek goddesses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who presided over the arts. They were all female. An artist's Muse is supposedly endowed with the power to guide and inspire – to be the source of creation. A Muse may be reverenced, even adored, but she is always objectified and exploited, reduced to a function. She is the necessary shaping spark that generates something she does not own, did not make, and cannot claim, that is, the work of art. The Muse is always interpreted, rewritten, possessed. She belongs to the artist who adores her. This is the most profound form of identity theft. Within her role as Muse, the actual woman has no ownership of her existence, and within that imagined world created by the art she has inspired she has no more power than a puppet.

And yet even this destiny is ambiguous. How many boring housewives and mothers with no talent whatsoever have achieved fame by being a great man's Muse? The Muse is always a phantom, an imaginary force in the life of the artist. And in his poem to her, the real Lewis Carroll says precisely that about Alice.

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> Still she haunts me, phantomwise.
> Alice moving under skies
> Never seen by waking eyes.
> (Lewis qtd. in Roiphe 2001: 223)[19]

Alice is a dream child, an imagined, created thing.

To return to my original ethical question: who was sacrificed to Lewis Carroll's art? In the material Victorian world, the sacrificial victim was clearly Alice herself, but something else happens in Roiphe's fiction. Roiphe decides to use the photographs. Dodgson was a gifted and celebrated portrait photographer. The Liddell household was filled with photographs of the three little girls, but especially of Alice. What if some of the photographs were too suggestive to be read as innocent or to be ignored? Roiphe does something extraordinary, unexpected, and strange. She uses Angela Carter's strategy of transforming a female victim into a heroine, a survivor, indeed a conqueror, by unleashing female desire.[20] Alice is given agency and power. She is a creative collaborator as well as a Muse: she controls her story, both her adventures in Wonderland and the novel in which Roiphe recreates her. She is nobody's victim. "She knew she was nobody's meat" (Carter 1995: 118). In the final section of *Still She Haunts Me*, Dodgson is taking photographs and Alice poses naked for him. It is not clear in the text whether he has asked her to strip or whether she does so of her own volition, but the effect is unexpected.

> She had seen her naked self in the oval mirror in Dodgson's room. A partial sideways sliver of her nakedness flew at her and startled her. […]
>
> Through it all she felt an emerging loveliness. […] Her skin satin. The light caught in her hair. A crown of flowers. The beauty she had not known was there. Running through her the pleasure of his looking; not his attraction to her, her attraction to herself. (Roiphe 2001: 178-179).

Alice knows adult sexual desire in a moment of transformation. Roiphe has exploited the fact that the Alice stories are all about metamorphosis, transformations, and bodily change: eat me, drink me, and you will change size. Wonderland is a world where a cat can be reduced to a sinister smile, a

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world where Alice grows to a gigantic size while giving her evidence, and the characters in the court are transformed into nothing but a pack of cards. Wonderland is filled with potential predators. Possibly the worst ones appear in *Through the Looking Glass* (1872) in the figures of the Walrus and the Carpenter, who lure the oysters down to the beach and then eat them. The dream-world is a dangerous place.

The shock of her own arousal has a terrifying effect upon the child, who does not completely understand what has been let loose within her body. But Roiphe suggests that Alice recovers herself. Children are resilient. They survive and grow up. Dr. Hunt, who is treating Dodgson for his stutter, investigates the case and interprets the photographs. He realises that no conclusions concerning Dodgson's motivation can ever be reached.

> It suddenly occurred to him that Dodgson could have no idea what the photographs meant. He may have been thinking fairies and nymphs, thinking gossamer and shimmer, thinking, who knows, the Royal Academy of Art and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Bocca Baciata"[21] without thinking how these three pieces of paper could compromise the girl's future. (Roiphe 2001: 204)

Dodgson might well be quite innocent. After all, he saw no evil in the photographs and gave them to Alice. In Roiphe's novel, Dodgson sees Alice's nakedness as "something sacred":

> There poised in front of him was the impossible convergence of opposites, the logical contradictions that had intrigued him about art for as long as he could remember: she was naked but not naked; it was illicit but not illicit; he had her but didn't have her […;] he wanted nothing more than to stand there and look at her. He had never known that state: wanting nothing more. He was enthralled. (Roiphe 2001: 183)

Unfortunately, however, Mrs. Liddell, now in possession of the photographs, supplied by Alice's jealous sister Edith, sees an affront to virginal decency. But despite her righteous fit of rage, she realises that were she to create a scandal and have the villainous photographic don run out of Oxford, her

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daughter's reputation would also be destroyed. Roiphe's point is perfectly clear. Her fictional resolution is not only about the peculiar erotic obsessions of Charles Dodgson, but also about Alice, sensing her sexual power for the first time.

5. Coda: Dead Authors and the Resurrection Men

The death of the author doesn't close the action in either of these biographical fictions by Roiphe and Tóibín. The writers whose life stories they have imagined are not complete. Both fictional historical writers will achieve lasting fame. But they have yet to do so. James faces the final and greatest period of his writing life. Carroll has yet to write *Through the Looking Glass* and become famous. Writers who are transformed into fictional characters are literally conjured back into life. They move, speak, feel, act. In history and biography, and indeed in academic literary criticism, they are already dead. And they stay dead, their motives judged, their works and lives assessed. Fiction gives the dead another chance.

In what ways, then, do we change the past when we reimagine its contours, its significance? James and Carroll already exist in many versions. And I am prepared to defend this recasting of real lives into countless fictional narratives. James and Carroll belonged to their historical times, but they also belong in a timeless world which they created in their imaginations, and that world can be reconfigured, rewritten, reimagined. Nobody knows the whole truth. Beyond the framework of existing evidence all the rest is informed guesswork. Writers as persons of interest, subjects for investigation, do not belong exclusively to historians and biographers; they also belong to their readers and to other writers. We are not only keepers of this particular archive: we are also its creators. We are the resurrection men.

Notes

1. However, see also the 2020 campaign by the Women's Prize for Fiction to strip women writers of their professional pseudonyms: Reclaim Her Name. This mishandled, botched project received a mixed reception from journalists and scholars (see Cain 2020). The argument over the Reclaim her Name Campaign rumbled on. The George Eliot Fellowship made it plain in their October 2020 *Newsletter* (available to members) that:

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> The George Eliot Fellowship wishes to make clear that we have no intention of renaming it
> The Mary Ann Evans Fellowship
> The Mary Anne Evans Fellowship
> The Marian Evans Fellowship
> The Marian Evans Lewes Fellowship
> The Mrs John Cross Fellowship
> The Marian Cross Fellowship
> Mindful as we are that it is none of our business to tell the 19th century how they should have behaved (there being more than enough motes in our own eyes), and mindful too of her request, in a letter to James A. H. Murray, 5 December 1879, that: "I wish always to be quoted as George Eliot. Thanking you for your courteous solicitude on this point, I remain, Yours very truly, M.E. Lewes" (*George Eliot Letters,* Vol. 9: 279).
> (George Eliot Fellowship 2020: n.p.).

Point well made. Point taken. This seems to me to be a more informed and tactful position to take on the vexed question of literary pseudonyms.

2. Joseph Merrick, a man with extensive facial disfigurement and bodily deformities, was exhibited under the name 'The Elephant Man' in late Victorian England when he came under the care of Sir Frederick Treves, a surgeon at the Royal London hospital. *The Elephant Man* is a 1980 historical drama film about Joseph Merrick. The film was directed by David Lynch and stars John Hurt, Anthony Hopkins, Anne Bancroft, John Gielgud, Wendy Hiller, Michael Elphick, Hannah Gordon, and Freddie Jones. Helen Davies discusses this film and three works of children's fiction, all entitled *The Elephant Man*, by Michael Howell and Peter Ford (1983), Frederick Drimmer (1985), and Tim Vicary (1989) in her contribution to the *Neo-Victorian Biofiction* collection (see Davies 2020).
3. *Gentleman Jack* (2019), a joint TV bio-drama of Anne Lister by HBO and BBC One, caused a mild lesbian stir on British television, but fell neatly into the category of 'period costume drama', a genre which occupies an undemanding, safe cultural and historical space in British culture. Season I dramatises the life of LGBTQ+ trailblazer, voracious learner, and cryptic diarist Anne Lister, who returns to Halifax, West Yorkshire in 1832, determined to transform the fate of her faded ancestral home, Shibden Hall.
4. Also see Boyce's very useful and elegant summary of the differing ethical considerations of the Alice/Carroll relationship in relation to biofictional ethics – or their apparent absence in the work of rogue novelists (Boyce 2020: 74-77).

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5. The internet neologism ‘fanfiction’ differs from the way I use the term ‘fan fiction’ later in this article; hence the two different spellings. The largest fan fiction site is *Fanfiction.net*, and the most interesting that I have investigated is *Wattpad.* The latter site is based in Canada and also includes original stories, as well as imitative fanfictions. But simply type in the names of popular fiction characters about whom you wish to read, or even the film stars who play those parts in the film versions, and they will probably come up. The readership for these sites is international and vast.
6. George R.R. Martin objected to Fanfiction in public on these grounds while accepting the Carl Sandburg Literary Award in Chicago in 2019. This is what Martin said, as reported by Dan Selke:

    > ***"I don’t think it’s a good way to train to be a professional writer when you’re borrowing everybody else’s world and characters. That’s like riding a bike with training wheels. And then when I took the training wheels off, I fell over a lot, but at some point you have to take the training wheels off here. You have to invent your own characters, you have to do your own world-building, you can’t just borrow from Gene Roddenberry or George Lucas or me or whoever."***

    His other objection is legal:

    > ***"The other thing is there are all sorts of copyright issues when you’re using other people’s work…My understanding of the law is that if I knew about I would have to try to stop it, so just don’t tell me about it and do what you want there."***

    “It’s not for me,” he concluded. “I don’t wanna read it and I would not encourage people to write it.” (Martin qtd. in Selke 2019: n.p., original bold italics).
7. The CfP is available on the Neo-Victorian Studies website (http://neovictorianstudies.com/). There is a perceptible weariness in the addition of ‘etc.’ at the end of the predictable list. I myself have addressed the issue of the “differential canonisation and depreciation of author figures” in my discussion of the relationship between Henry James and Constance Fenimore Woolson. But what I do not do is suggest that she was a more significant and influential novelist than Henry James. I do not think she was. But she still deserves to be remembered and to be read. James tried to write her out of his life, and I have tried to write her back in. For a welcome critical dissection of ‘political correctness’ and the obligatory long list of the marginal, the disenfranchised, and the ignored, see Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay’s

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Cynical Critical Theories (2020), which scores many robust and palpable hits; also see McWorter (2022).

8. The fictitious diary was actually approved for publication by the Vladimir Nabokov Literary Foundation. Tison, who was sexually abused as a child, decided to rewrite the book from Lolita's perspective because her silence in Nabokov's 1955 original reminded him of his own. An unsettling French case is recounted by Vanessa Springora, in *Le Consentement* (2020). Her abuser was the writer Gabriel Matzneff, and her account of the affair caused a stir in Parisian literary circles. The book has been well translated by Natasha Lehrer as *Consent* (2021).
9. *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee was published in 1999 and won the Booker Prize in the same year. The writer was also awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature four years after its publication. See my essay, 'On Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Fiction: J.M. Coetzee *Disgrace* and Pauline Melville *The Ventriloquist's Tale*' (Duncker 2002).
10. In using this metaphor of resurrection in the macabre sense of digging up the bodies, I am of course taking issue in a very mild way with Marie-Luise Kohlke's image of biofiction as "imaginative grave robbery" (Kohlke 2013:13).
11. For an in-depth study of all the versions, biographical, fictional, dramatic of Dr James Barry, which illuminates the contradictions and mysteries and interrogates the mythologies surrounding the mysterious doctor, see Heilmann, 2018.
12. *The Master* by Irish writer Colm Tóibín is his fifth novel, shortlisted for the 2004 Booker Prize. The book received the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the Stonewall Book Award, the Lambda Literary Award, the Los Angeles Times Novel of the Year Award and, in France, *Le prix du meilleur livre étranger* in 2005. This occasioned something of a literary outburst from David Lodge, whose novel *Author Author* (2004), also centres upon Henry James and covers much the same ground, but his book was not so graciously honoured with literary prizes. Lodge went on to write about this in a 2006 collection of essays, *The Year of Henry James: The Story of a Novel*. In his article 'The Author's Curse', Lodge admitted: "Colm Tóibín's novel and mine had much more in common than either had with any of the other novels about Henry James. (I have not read The Master [sic], but I have assimilated some information about it indirectly […])" (Lodge 2006: n.p.).
13. Twenty days before her death by suicide on March 28, 1941, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, "I intend no introspection. I mark Henry James' sentence: observe perpetually. Observe the oncome of age. Observe greed. Observe my

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own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable. Or so I hope. I insist upon spending this time to the best advantage. I will go down with my colours flying" (Woolf 1972: 365).

14. *The Turn of the Screw* first appeared in serial format in *Collier's Weekly* (27 January – 16 April 1898). In October 1898, it was collected in *The Two Magics,* published by Macmillan in New York City and Heinemann in London. The tale has had an extraordinary afterlife in opera and film and generated a mass of literary interpretations. The narrative is both a Victorian Gothic horror story and a study in literary ambiguity. The illustration to the first instalment of the first published edition represented the Governess and Miles, and this too is ambiguous. Is the governess protective or predatory?
15. I am grateful to Helen Davies for calling attention to this useful and concise discussion of presentism in her excellent essay on the representations of Joseph Merrick (see Davies 2020; also see Kohlke 2018).
16. Charlotte Boyce also makes this point in her essay, 'Who in the World am I?' (see Boyce 2020: 76-77). Every writer wants their book to find readers and to sell well, as do their publishers, but Roiphe's bolder method of naming her historical figures as characters seems to me not only more honest, but more suggestive and more interesting.
17. Dana Shiller also argues that neo-Victorian fictions are "at least partly responsible for a renaissance of the pleasures of plot" (Shiller 2012: 84).
18. Writing in *The Author,* Hilary Mantel responded to questions in the 'writer at work' series. She acknowledged that she refuses to change historical 'facts' in her fiction, in so far as the facts can ever be truly known, but goes on to say: "The challenge is to make real history sound half credible. Of course, you wish events were a more elegant shape, but there lies the challenge and the interest: trying to find, but not impose, coherence" (Mantel 2019: 103). Here, *coherence* stands in for plot. But history is often incoherent. And there can indeed be a difference between a satisfying story and a meaningful one. Toíbín selects a small, but significant period in James's life.
19. The poem from *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872), which spells out Alice's name in the first letters of each line, is untitled, but usually known by its first line: 'A Boat, beneath a sunny sky'. It is republished as the last words of *Still She Haunts Me* and the last thoughts that Carroll has of Alice in the fiction. But I note that what Carroll remembers is the dream Alice, the child that never ages. She cannot be possessed but neither can she ever escape. She remains the Muse and his captive ghost (see Roiphe 2001: 223).

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20. Carter uses this tactic in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), her erotic versions of the fairy tales. The most revealing tales are her versions of 'Red Riding Hood' and 'Beauty and the Beast'; a tale entitled 'The Tiger's Bride' is especially relevant, so too 'The Company of Wolves'. But it is worth noting that Carter concentrates on reconfiguring female heterosexual desire. This is her controversial strategy for dealing with male rapists. Try seducing them instead.
21. *Bocca Baciata* (1859) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the first of his pictures of single female figures, established the style that was later to become a signature of his work. The model was Fanny Cornforth, the principal inspiration for Rossetti's sensuous figures. Both Rossetti and his sister, the poet Christina Rossetti, appear as characters in Roiphe's novel. The writer uses Christina's poem 'Goblin Market' (1862) as a recurring motif. The goblins are seducers, potential rapists, and the echo of the poem is there in Wonderland: "Eat me, drink me, love me" (Rossetti 1970: 26). These are the words Dodgson dare not say to Alice. *Bocca Baciata* is both sensual and suggestive and means, of course, 'the kissed mouth'.

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