

An (Auto)Biofictional (Re-)Writing of a Brontë Classic: Alison Case's *Nelly Dean* (2016)

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Abstract:

Alison Case's *Nelly Dean* (2016) is in many ways typical of the numerous re-writings of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). In this contemporary novel, constructed as a monologic epistolary retelling of its famous hypotext, Nelly is given the opportunity to tell Mr. Lockwood her side of the story, as well as to provide new information about her relationships to the other characters, especially Hindley Earnshaw. Moreover, the double interrogation of who exactly Nelly is writing for and why she is writing looms larger and larger as the story develops. This article focuses on the analysis of this self-reflexivity and on the promotion of Nelly Dean from second-hand narrator in *Wuthering Heights* to writer of her own biography in Case's eponymous novel.

Keywords: (auto)biofiction, biofiction, Emily Brontë, Alison Case, coquel, epistolary novel, *Nelly Dean*, neo-Victorian, re-writing, *Wuthering Heights*.

Characters writing letters within Victorian novels are quite common. They are usually to be found among the main protagonists and generally belong to the educated class. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), for example, Isabella Linton's letter to Nelly Dean explaining what has happened to her after she eloped with Heathcliff takes up most of Chapter 13. Nelly, the main narrator, has kept this letter, for as she says, "any relic of the dead is precious, if they were valued living" (Brontë 1960: 159). She reads it some twenty years later to Mr Lockwood, the frame narrator, as part of the wider story she is telling him about her masters and mistresses, the Earnshaws, the Lintons, and the Heathcliffs.

Even though *Nelly Dean* does not "reimagine the lives of actual nineteenth-century existents in global *real-world* and alternative reality contexts" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 3, added emphasis) and is therefore not, strictly speaking, a neo-Victorian biofiction, it does nonetheless share

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many of biofiction's characteristics, owing to the (literary) celebrity status of its canonical source text and characters, thus pushing the boundaries of the form. It is indeed a re-writing of one of the most famous novels of the nineteenth century,¹ from the sole point of view of Nelly Dean who, in the source-text, originally tells Mr Lockwood the story he then relates. This particular re-writing, then, is a "contemporary fiction set in the nineteenth century" (Carroll 2010: 172), but more specifically a neo-Victorian coquel, "evoking events that are simultaneous with the source text" (Parey 2019: 3) and "tak[ing] place in the 'same' diegetic universe as their pre-text" (Spengler 2015: 18). Case's novel retells, sometimes in more detail and at other times more elliptically, incidents familiar to the readers of *Wuthering Heights* and adds a number of related episodes and characters directly linked to Nelly, like her mother or old Dr Kenneth's son.

This coquel is constructed as a monologic epistolary novel, focusing on the letters of only one character, namely Nelly Dean who, from the passive recipient of letters in *Wuthering Heights*, has become an active letter-writer herself. The novel is divided into twenty-seven chapters plus an un-numbered post-script and consists of three letters written by Nelly at different times, all starting with "Dear Mr Lockwood" (Case 2016a: 1, 448, 469). There are also within her narrative two letters written to Nelly by her mother (in Chapters 5 and 27) and one by her father (in Chapter 5)² which, like the Nelly Dean of *Wuthering Heights*, she has kept for sentimental reasons. Transcribed by Nelly, the three letters from her parents are clearly differentiated from the main text by the use of italics. They do not alter the monologic nature of the novel as they have no bearing on the following events. Nelly clearly remains in sole charge of the narrative, in which her parents – her father in particular – are minor characters. Therefore, the epistolary novel's typical result, in its more usual polylogic form, of changing and/or conflicting points of view as individual perspectives are presented by the different letter-writing characters (as in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's 1782 *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* or the neo-Victorian novels studied by Kym Brindle in *Epistolary Encounters* for example³) does not appear here. I first consider the narrative consequences of using Nelly as the only narrator in this neo-Victorian novel and the nature of the autobiographical status of the text. Then, I explore the revelations contained in the re-writing, analysing how they differ from other neo-Victorian novels. Finally, I examine questions arising from Dean's choice of Mr Lockwood as the putative addressee of Nelly's letters.

1. From Storyteller to Sole Author/Narrator

Nelly's first letter to Mr. Lockwood spans the bulk of the Case's novel, straddling as it does twenty-six chapters (out of twenty-seven). It re-tells the events related in the source text, from Heathcliff's arrival at Wuthering Heights in September 1771,⁴ which Nelly describes as marking "the end of [her] childhood" (Case 2016a: 8), to a few months after Catherine II⁵ and Hareton's wedding at the beginning of 1803. After the wedding, Nelly has been sent to rest by the seaside where, for once in her busy life, she has a lot of free time on her hands and, finding her "mind turning more and more to the past" (Case 2016a: 447), she begins to write what Case's readers peruse.

Case's choice of using Nelly Dean as a re-writer of a canonical text is in itself quite revealing of her intent. In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly's status in the Earnshaw household is ambiguous: she is after all "Hindley's foster-sister" (Brontë 1960: 92; also Case 2016: 44), an educated servant who had shared the lessons, games and more generally, lives, of the children of Wuthering Heights until Heathcliff's arrival. She has therefore been taught to read and write, and in Brontë's novel, the pedantic Mr Lockwood compliments her very patronisingly on her way of expressing herself:

Excepting a few provincialisms of slight consequence, you have no marks of the manners which I am habituated to consider peculiar to your class. I am sure you have thought a great deal more than the generality of servants think. You have been compelled to cultivate your reflective faculties for want of occasion for frittering your life away in silly trifles. (Brontë 1960: 89)

To this back-handed compliment, Nelly replies as follows:

I certainly esteem myself a steady, reasonable kind of body [...]. I have undergone sharp discipline, which has taught me wisdom; and then, I have read more than you would fancy, Mr Lockwood. You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also; unless it be in the range of Greek and Latin, and that of French; and those I know one from another. (Brontë 1960: 89)

That this avid reader should become a writer in Alison Case's contemporary retelling is therefore totally in keeping with her Victorian background. It is also nonetheless a very contemporary way of promoting this relatively minor character from storyteller to writer. As Jeremy Rosen points out, in neo-Victorian novels, "the conversion of a minor character to a narrator becomes an act of liberation or granting of free speech to that character and an act of historical recovery" (Rosen 2016: 200, fn. 60), even though in this particular case Nelly was already the main narrator in *Wuthering Heights*.

By promoting Nelly to the role of sole narrator of this coquel, however, Case is expanding her role in the storytelling. In *Wuthering Heights*, Mr Lockwood is the frame narrator, "the one through whose consciousness all the events of the plot are ostensibly filtered" (Worth 1968: 315). He is the narrator of the first four chapters, and he also closes the narrative, so that the story's ultimate authority rests with the male. In *Nelly Dean*, Mr Lockwood disappears in the background, becoming from the start the mere addressee of Nelly's "Dear Mr Lockwood" letters. He is never given a voice of his own. Getting rid altogether of a condescending, upper-class, male centre of consciousness and replacing him with a female servant is another typical neo-Victorian feminist gesture.⁶

The elimination of Mr. Lockwood as narrator and his new status as the passive recipient of Nelly's letter has another consequence on the narrative. The gothic or supernatural element introduced in Chapter 3 of *Wuthering Heights* by his encounter with the ghost of the first Catherine while spending the night in her old room in November 1801 – "swarming with ghosts and goblins", as he describes it (Brontë 1960: 55) – is perforce written out of the new text. Case explains that she "wanted to give the supernatural the same ambiguous, slightly uncanny status in *Nelly Dean*" (Case 2016b: 482). The loss of the best known and most striking ghostly scene from *Wuthering Heights* is thus compensated for in the re-writing by two added tales. Firstly, Case introduces the fairy-tale of the Brownie (a kind of goblin), narrated in Chapter 4 to Nelly by her mother, which she, in turn, appropriates and tells Mr Lockwood (see Case 2016a: 44). Popular culture thus also finds its way into the re-writing of a canonical novel. The question of what the supercilious Mr Lockwood is supposed to think of such a plebeian story is not addressed in Nelly's letter. Secondly, while the rest of the story is told in Nelly's down-to-earth, commonsensical approach, the reader's willing suspension of disbelief is stretched to its limit when she relates at length how,

against all reasonable odds, she managed to breast-feed Hareton (and later Catherine II) thanks to a potion given to her by the witch-like Elspeth.

As the sole narrator of her story, Nelly also uses her letter to either justify or gloss over the actions of the Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, which have led some critics to take a very disapproving view of her.⁷ In ‘A Q&A with Alison Case’, a paratextual interview published at the end of the novel, the author staunchly defends Nelly’s acquired habit of keeping secrets and misleading people as a survival technique “as a relatively powerless person in a troubled household” (Case 2016b: 478); yet Case also acknowledges that her Nelly “is not immune to self-serving distortions and revisionism” (Case 2016b: 478). The most-often quoted example of Nelly’s alleged villainy is to be found in Chapter 9 of the source-text, when she deliberately misleads Catherine by telling her that Heathcliff is “about his work in the stable” (Brontë 1960: 103), whereas he is, in fact, listening to their conversation, sitting on a bench just outside the room. Catherine then confesses to Nelly that she has accepted Edgar Linton’s marriage proposal, famously telling her that it would degrade her to marry Heathcliff (see Brontë 1960: 106). This of course is going to have disastrous consequences for all the characters. In Case’s re-writing, the whole chapter and its momentous incidents are condensed into a single paragraph. Compared to the source text, this is a very elliptic and much edited account of what happened, and Nelly appears here as an unreliable narrator, glossing over the circumstances of that fateful evening, refusing to accept her responsibility and ignoring her own role in the following catastrophic events. Of course, within the narrative convention of the coquel, the alleged addressee, Mr Lockwood, has already been told what had happened by Nelly in *Wuthering Heights*. But to a reader who has not read the source text, this version of events is arguably misleading. In the ‘Q&A’, Case justifies her approach by claiming that she felt her students were “inclined to identify with the big, charismatic central characters” and “were often unfair to Nelly – too ready to blame her for anything that went wrong” (Case 2016b: 477). By making Nelly the sole writer of her own story, she certainly goes a long way in redeeming this ambiguous character.

Like any “neo-Victorian biofiction”, *Nelly Dean* “deconstructs nineteenth-century master-narratives to enact a democratic rehabilitation of overlooked lives” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 1). Indeed, as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben note, since the 1980s, “biofiction and neo-

Victorian biofiction in particular” have increasingly “select[ed] their focal points from marginalised groups, such as subalterns or children” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 16). The idea is in keeping with the basic assertion found in many neo-Victorian novels “that every individual regardless of race, gender or class is equally compelling and therefore qualified to be a protagonist (deserving of a ‘voice’)” (Rosen 2016: 36). This new narrative point of view is another sign of the contemporaneity of *Nelly Dean* and its evident aim to manipulate twenty-first-century readers’ sympathies. After all, readers of neo-Victorian fiction, Rosen points out, tend to adhere to “a set of consensus values of liberal pluralism” (Rosen 2016: 40). According to Rosen, these values operate

in the service of the production of sympathy, concern, and identification with a previously minor character who was not, by virtue of her minorness, the principal object of concern in the precursor text. The typical method for achieving such a reorientation of narrative priorities is the representation of the character’s rich interiority – a subjectivity that was not represented in the precursor text. (Rosen 2016: 25)

The distinction made by Kohlke and Gutleben between biofictions’ “empathic motive”, which “pursues an implicitly ethical agenda by seeking knowledge to better understand”, and such texts’ “prying impulse”, which “opportunistically collaborates in contemporary consumerism and strategic marketing akin to the tabloid exposé” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 26), is clearly applicable here. Case’s novel tends to make Nelly more acceptable to the readers by describing in her own words her harsh conditions of life as a servant while revealing hidden aspects of the relationship between well-known characters. Both impulses or orientations are, indeed, “*conjoined*” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 28, original emphasis) in *Nelly Dean*. The twenty-first-century reader is bound to feel empathy for Nelly while at the same time the intimacy resulting from this “empathic re-voicing” encourages or “facilitates (self-)revelation and hence the exposure of even the most private aspects of subjects’ lives to audiences’ prurient voyeurism” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 4, 28), like for example Nelly’s induced miscarriage or the details of her breast-feeding.

2. Unexpected Revelations

As is to be expected in neo-Victorian novels, *Nelly Dean* contains revelations about the characters, mostly of a sexual nature. However, unlike most other re-writings of *Wuthering Heights* that I have read, the revealed family secrets do not concern Heathcliff but Nelly herself.⁸ The main point of the first letter is indeed the burgeoning and the end of Nelly's clandestine love affair with Hindley Earnshaw, which takes centre stage and pushes Heathcliff and Catherine's own story, at the very heart of *Wuthering Heights*, into the background, thus creating a parallel narrative. This love story is not totally improbable within the framework of the hypotext. Many readers and critics of *Wuthering Heights* have noted Nelly's partiality for Hindley. As early as 1956, John Mathison remarked that Nelly is "actively taking the part of Hindley while he is tormenting the child Heathcliff" and that "the most Nelly can admit is that Hindley was a 'bad example' for Heathcliff" (Mathison 1956: 120, 121). And nearly fifty years later, Samantha Przybylowicz, noting that "as a child, Hindley is described as degrading and abusing Heathcliff on a regular basis", remarks that he nonetheless "is not often blatantly described as being malevolent" (Przybylowicz 2013: 8). The critic proceeds to analyse Nelly's obvious bias: "Nelly, our main narrator, has an affinity for him [...]. Nelly's perspective causes a skewed dismissal of Hindley's aggression [...] because of the sympathy she exhibits for him throughout the narrative" (Przybylowicz 2013: 9). For her part, in her essay on Emily Brontë's novel, reprinted in the seminal *Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert states that Hindley "was evidently once as close to Nelly as Heathcliff was to Catherine" (Gilbert 2000: 290). This closeness is taken a step further in *Nelly Dean*, as the author herself explains:

Cathy and Heathcliff tear each other apart emotionally in ways not unlike what Hindley does to Nelly. I wanted to explore the impact of that kind of love on someone who is herself more 'normal' – more broadly affectionate, less singular and obsessive in her love. (Case 2016b: 480)

In that regard, *Nelly Dean* clearly "picks up on the ambiguity already present in the Brontëan text" and "positions itself in [its] footsteps, as a magnifying lens or an echo chamber which chooses to amplify the half-voiced and half-silenced clues" in Emily Brontë's novel (Král 2019: 54, 55), rather than

simply filling in the narrative blanks in its source text. Case is thus extrapolating, conjecturing from what is implicit in Brontë's novel to make it explicit in her own text.

Many revelations in neo-Victorian novels involve sex scenes, engaging in what Marie-Luise Kohlke terms "sexsation", which she defines as "contemporary writers' fascination with the nineteenth-century erotic and the multivalent forms of literary re-imaginings of Victorian sexualities" (Kohlke 2018: 53). Such prurience becomes almost normative.⁹ Yet in *Nelly Dean*, the love-making scene between Hindley (just before he is sent away to college by his father in October 1774) and Nelly as they are sheltering from a storm in a cave is the only one described (or, more exactly, *not* described). Indeed, the passage is striking for its coyness and naïve sentimentality:

our refuge kept dry, and crammed in as we were, it soon warmed up as well. [...] Do I really need to tell you what happened next? [...] Remember that we [...] thought ourselves as good as betrothed. [...] And I loved him. Yes, there on our heathery bed in that little earthen chamber [...], I loved him with all my heart. (Case 2016a: 170-171)

The consequences of the clandestine love affair, however, are shattering, for Nelly becomes pregnant. But as the reader of *Wuthering Heights* knows,¹⁰ there is no mention of Nelly and Hindley's child in *Wuthering Heights*. According to the narrative conventions of the coquel, *Nelly Dean* cannot deviate too much from the original storyline. Hence unsurprisingly, Nelly loses the child after being forced by her mother to drink an abortive potion. Whereas the love-making scene is rendered allusively, using a rhetorical question as narrative device, the description of the effects of the potion and the abortion itself is quite detailed, generating compassion for the narrator in the contemporary reader rather than "the delicious thrill of scandal" (Gutleben 2001: 173) provided by explicit sex scenes in many neo-Victorian novels. Since no respectable Victorian novel would deal as openly with issues such as abortion, this is "another example of a modern-day presence in the text" (Van der Meer 2004: 78) and clearly identifies *Nelly Dean* as contemporary despite its Victorian setting and style. Indeed, as Rosen points out, "the process of expansion [...] is necessarily presentist, informed by a contemporary sense of what is realistic, plausible, truthful, or authentic"

(Rosen 2016: 170). Case seems to try and have it both ways with Victorian narrative conventions: while conforming to them on the taboo of representing actual sex scenes, she also breaches them with her depiction of Nelly's abortion (and later breast-feeding).

At the end of the second letter, Nelly's mother's death-bed confession, which Nelly finds among old Joseph's papers after his death, retrospectively sheds a new light onto the whole story and onto her mother and herself. In that letter, transcribed by Nelly in italics like the first one, Mary Dean reveals why Nelly's alleged father, Thomas Dean, hated her: Mary had tricked him into marrying her when she found out she was pregnant by another man. When he realised he had been duped, he became violent, and Mary decided to send the child away to Wuthering Heights to protect her (see Case 2016a: 461). She then "confesses that Nelly is in fact Mr Earnshaw's illegitimate daughter and so Hindley and Catherine's half-sister", and Hareton and Catherine II's aunt; "[t]he love affair between Nelly and Hindley", which is at the heart of the first letter, "was thus incestuous" (Roblin 2020: para. 22). Mrs Dean confirms what Nelly (and the reader) had suspected all along: she deliberately gave Nelly an abortive potion when she found out that she was pregnant: "*you see why I had to interfere between you and Hindley, and why I could not let you bear his child?*", Mary writes, asking for her daughter's forgiveness (Case 2016a: 461, original italics). Whereas the suggestion of possible incestuous relations between the main characters of *Wuthering Heights* has been investigated in other neo-Victorian novels,¹¹ what is new in *Nelly Dean* is the text's exploration of Hindley and Nelly's (unwitting) breaking of the incest taboo rather than the nature of the relationship between the much more romantic and charismatic pair Catherine and Heathcliff. Alison Case herself explains that "the strangeness and intensity of [Heathcliff and Catherine's] bond is central to the power of *Wuthering Heights*" and that she "wanted to leave it undiminished" (Case 2016b: 483). Therefore her coquel instead concentrates on the less glamorous and clandestine couple formed by Hindley and Nelly.

However, even if Nelly's mother's second letter-within-the-letter declares a great deal, the revelation of Nelly's true parentage is, in fact, pre-empted. Indeed, she first learns about it from Robert 'Bodkin' Kenneth, Dr Kenneth's son, her childhood friend, who has by then succeeded his father, who had told him that Nelly was in fact Hindley's sister to prevent a possible incestuous marriage between the two (see Case 2016a: 458). As Nelly puts it,

following that bombshell, “so many things were recurring to my mind in a new light now” (Case 2016a: 458), and all the ambiguities and mysteries she recalled in the first letter (Mr Earnshaw’s relationship to her and her mother, Hindley’s reactions, but also her mother’s and her alleged father’s behaviours) are then resolved.

3. The Vexed Question of the Letters’ Addressee

Given the intimate nature of the letters, the choice of Mr Lockwood as their addressee is somewhat surprising. As Nelly says at the beginning of Case’s novel, he certainly does not expect to hear from her after leaving Thrushcross Grange for the second time in September 1802, having been told the updated story of Heathcliff’s death three months earlier and of Hareton and Cathy’s upcoming wedding on the following New Year’s Day (see Brontë 1960: 317, 321, 347). Nelly then makes the purpose of her letter clear. She wants to tell him her own account of the events and reveal what she had not told him at the time, hoping he would be as interested in her story as he had been in Catherine and Heathcliff’s (see Case 2016a: 2). However, there is little chance of that happening, as Brontë’s snobbish Mr Lockwood’s remark about Nelly in *Wuthering Heights* suggests: “She was no gossip, I feared; unless about her own affairs, and *those could hardly interest me*” (Brontë 1960: 61, added emphasis). Nelly’s first task in her letter is therefore to try and convince Mr Lockwood that “her own affairs” *are* worthy of being told and read, even though she is at first very class-conscious and self-deprecatory: “Who would be interested in such a story, compared to the destructive passions of highborn ladies and gentlemen, and orphans of mysterious parentage?” (Case 2016a: 218-219). Her sense of class inferiority is at first almost overwhelming, and in keeping with the strict Victorian value hierarchy. However, in a typical neo-Victorian fashion, she then makes the point that passionate feelings are not the preserve of the ruling classes but are shared by all classes of society, thereby aligning herself with more modern, equalitarian values: “But I can tell you, the story was vivid enough for me, while I was living it, and the tears for my lost dream none the less bitter, for shaking the bosom of a stout, plain girl in a homespun apron and cap” (Case 2016a: 219). Nelly’s story, in other words, “is just as ‘vivid’ as Heathcliff’s, the Lintons’ and the Earnshaws” and thus deserves to be heard (Roblin 2020: para. 6). She has no illusion about the class-prejudiced Mr. Lockwood, however, and soon realizes that he would certainly feel no sympathy for her and treat her story with scorn, not because

it is not interesting in itself, but because he is a social bigot. He would probably be on the side of the aristocratic Charles Smithson who, in the mock Victorian ending in Chapter 44 of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), exclaims: "who can be bothered with the biography of servants? They married, and bred, and died, in the monotonous fashion of their kind" (Fowles 1973: 292-293). Mr. Lockwood is thus the addressee by default of Nelly's letter, until she finally decides at the end of the second letter who is going to read it.

In the third and final letter she writes to Mr Lockwood, Nelly briefly tells him what has happened since he last came to Wuthering Heights and, at the very end, goes back to the idea of her own story being as interesting as those of her masters:

You took such a kind interest in all I told you of my masters and mistress – of the Earnshaws, and Lintons, and Heathcliffs – that I have presumed you will not be averse to hearing a little more, and will even extend your interest to a line or two about myself. If I have presumed too much, let me offer my apologies for wasting your time with such a long letter as this has been.
(Case 2016a: 471, original italics)

Her intellectual evolution is striking, from being convinced that her story has no interest whatsoever to "presuming" it might hold the attention of the conceited Mr Lockwood. The notion that servants and masters in particular have an equally interesting albeit different life experience to relate and that servants are equally deserving of the narrator-protagonist status is "deeply compatible" with the equalitarian values of a twenty-first century "liberal readership" (Rosen 2016: 36). However it is not, as Nelly herself points out, the prevailing attitude of a Victorian one.

As Nelly's letter turns into a confession exploring her "rich interiority" (Case 2016a: 376), she begins to question her choice of addressee. Specifically, she wonders what Mr Lockwood would do with her letter:

Would you read it through? And if you did, would you share it with your friends and acquaintances? Or would you read the first few pages, grow weary, and slip the rest in the fire? And

which of those fates would be worst, after all? (Case 2016a: 161-162)

She then concludes with a pun on Lockwood's name, which shows an attempt to distance herself from him:

No, I will never send it to you. I address you as 'Mr Lockwood', because I must address myself to somebody, but it could as sensibly be Mr Knockwood – for I do feel sometimes, as I think on the trials and sorrows of the past, and how fortunate I am to be done with them, that I should knock on wood – or better, Mr Lockheart – for truly, these things might be better kept locked in my heart. (Case 2016a: 162)

Nonetheless, she continues with the writing of her letter, which then becomes a sort of autobiographical therapy, or scriptotherapy:¹² re-entering “those years of shame and anger and grief beyond all bearing” (Case 2016a: 162) will allow her “to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone or no-one” (Henke 1998: xix). She will thus eventually come to terms with her traumatic past as “the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis” (Henke 1998: xix).

The first letter ends with Nelly wondering what she is going to do with the stack of paper her initial letter has turned into (see Case 2016a: 447), and who will ever read it. So far she has only decided whom she is *not* writing for: “I will never send this to you Mr Lockwood, Mr Knockwood, Mr Lockheart”, (Case 2016a: 376) she writes, reiterating her pun. But she also states that her narrative is not meant for Cathy's eyes either (see Case 2016a: 386). In the second letter, written about a year after the first one, and corresponding to the last chapter and to the end of the source novel, Nelly explains that she had put the first letter out of her sight, “tied it all up with a red ribbon, wrapped it in an old linen pillowcase, and put it under some blankets in a trunk” (Case 2016a: 448), before pulling it out again, in order to finish her story. By the end of the letter, Nelly finally has a solution to the question of her letter's addressee: “And writing now, I find I have another answer too. I know who will read this” (Case 2016a: 468): Robert Kenneth, old Dr Kenneth's son, her childhood friend and husband-to-be, who, it is also

revealed, has always been in love with her, in spite of her previous love for and sexual affair with Hindley, her half-brother. Robert's ability to overlook his future wife's youthful sexual transgression is certainly not typical of Victorian husbands (fictional or otherwise) but is, on the other hand, in keeping with the liberal values of contemporary readers of neo-Victorian literature.

Nelly's last short letter to Mr Lockwood, written in italics, is different in style and nature from the other two. To start with, it is an answer to a letter by Mr Lockwood, never directly quoted but only referred to: "*In reply to yours of the 18th of June*" (Case 2016a: 469, original italics). Lockwood's letter tells Nelly that he is engaged to be married and offers her a job "*as the housekeeper of [his] London establishment, and at double [her] present wages*" (Case 2016a: 470, original italics). Unlike the other two, this letter, almost business-like in tone, in which she explains why she is not going to accept his offer, is obviously written to be actually sent to Mr Lockwood. Moving ahead a few years, it goes beyond the ending of *Wuthering Heights*, a fairly rare move in a coquel since coquels do not usually "disrupt the original ending" of their source texts (Parey 2019: 10). Nelly's final letter provides a new, happy, 'feel-good' ending, as she tells Mr. Lockwood that "*Cathy and Hareton's modest wedding went off as planned, and the pair are now happily settled at Thrushcross Grange*", that "*they have a little girl now, and Cathy is expecting her second confinement in December*" (Case 2016a: 469-470, original italics), and that she herself is about to marry Dr Robert Kenneth and hopes to eventually have a child of her own. *Nelly Dean's* resolutely optimistic closure is thus cliché-ridden and comes dangerously close to the traditional endings mocked by Henry James as "a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions" (James 1953: 590). It is much more conventional than its precursor's conclusion, which ends after all with Mr. Lockwood visiting the graves of the main characters who, even in death, continue to tower over the story and the lives of the living. In Case's alternative ending, the emphasis is on domesticity rather than passion, on the living rather than the dead. In short, it is typical of Nelly herself.

4. Conclusion: *Nelly Dean*, a Tribute to *Wuthering Heights*

This re-writing of *Wuthering Heights* is certainly a re-righting of Nelly Dean. By having her write her own story, Case has ticked most of the boxes of the

neo-Victorian novel. The female servant has taken full control of the story, relegating the priggish Mr Lockwood to a passive role. Her own story is worth writing and reading about and proves as interesting as that of her masters. She is able to reveal a few dirty family secrets, even though they are not what the twenty-first-century reader has come to expect, and to show herself in a much more positive light, having secured the reader's sympathy and compassion. There is, however, a big difference between *Nelly Dean* and other neo-Victorian novels, even though in many of them letters (and diaries) are also omnipresent (see Brindle 2013: 5). In their "epistolary encounters", "contemporary writers tend not to emphasise uncovering of 'truths', but rather deconstruct how investigatory reading and interpretation take place" and "stress that material traces of the past are fragmentary, incomplete, and contradictory" (Brindle 2013: 3-4). In contrast, Case, not unlike her Victorian counterparts, uses this particular form to reveal secrets and tell untold stories, without any intention of deconstructing the source text. *Nelly Dean* is certainly not written as a "neo-Victorian project of metacritical disruption or subversion" (Brindle 2013: 7). Case's re-writing is not a parody; it does not criticise, vilify or make fun of the main characters of the source text or of Victorian society.¹³ Case herself writes in her postscript 'Writing *Nelly Dean*': "I had no wish to falsify [...] the original [...]. I wanted my story to deepen and complicate the original, not to undermine or simplify it" (Case 2016c: 490). *Nelly Dean* is, in fact, a homage to and a pastiche of *Wuthering Heights*.¹⁴ However, Case's contention "that a reader need not be familiar with *Wuthering Heights* to enjoy [her novel]", which has the "same narrator, same time frame, same characters, many of the same events" and is "faithful to the original" (Case 2016c: 490) seems somewhat *outré*. What Kohlke and Gutleben point out about biofictions, that "[w]ithout the recognisability of the historical referent's trace in the reconfigured subject, the texts fail to fully materialise" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 9), could equally apply to fictional re-writings: the knowledge of the hypotexts is a pre-requisite to fully appreciate the changes brought about in their hypertexts, which can rarely stand alone on their own merits.

Just as "[b]iofictions may [...] be regarded as one of the aesthetic forms *par excellence* for mediating, remediating and shaping popular perceptions of the past" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 4), neo-Victorian re-writings can also revise our apprehension of canonical novels and characters. While amplifying some of "the half-voiced and half-silenced clues" of the

source text (Král 2019: 55), *Nelly Dean* does not fundamentally alter our perception of *Wuthering Heights* in the way that Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the acknowledged ancestor of neo-Victorian re-writings, did with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Nonetheless, there is another aspect to this re-writing, directly linked to the epistolary genre chosen by the author. This particular (auto)biofiction or (fictional) life-writing¹⁵ can be considered as "a powerful form of scriptotherapy" (Henke 1998: xv), leading to Nelly's narrative recovery, with the term "evok[ing] both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject" (Henke 1998: xxii). The story turns into a "healing narrative" (Henke 1998: xvi) as the conclusion of the hypotext is considerably altered to pave the way for a new happy ending, which sees the quiet domestic triumph of Nelly Dean from teller of others' tumultuous story to narrator of her own.

Notes

1. This article builds on my previous analysis of Case's novel in 'Alison Case's *Nelly Dean* (2016): An Exceptional Neo-Victorian Novel?' (2020) and expands on my earlier argument by highlighting the (auto)biofictional strategies of Case's re-writing.
2. In her letter, Mary Dean describes her new life away from *Wuthering Heights* but also the terrible conditions of existence and work of the wool-combers' children she lives next to (see Case 2016a: 86). This brief but explicit denunciation of the ills of the industrial revolution is unexpected within the framework of a re-writing of a novel set in rural England, but to a certain extent is in keeping with the social criticism voiced by nineteenth-century writers like Charles Dickens or Elizabeth Gaskell. Contrary to her mother's letter, the letter her father sends Nelly, urging her to leave *Wuthering Heights* and join him in his new place of work (which she will not), reflects his lack of formal education but also shows that Nelly herself is not totally free of class prejudices: "all but the signature written not in his own painstaking, coarse print but with a flowing script that told me he had pressed someone into service as a scribe" (Case 2016a: 79). As she later somewhat self-reflexively comments: "Letters were scarce in those days, so this one would have been a prize whatever its contents, but 'Your loving father' moved me to tears, and remained precious to me for years, even after I realized that it was but a conventional closure, probably

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- suggested by the scribe” (Case 2016a: 80). The nature of her previous relationship to her father (a violent man who regularly beat her) had not prepared her for this change in his attitude.
3. The epistolary novels she studies in detail are A. S. Byatt’s *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and *The Biographer’s Tale* (2001), Sarah Waters’s *Affinity* (1999), Melissa Pritchard’s *Selene of the Spirits* (1998), Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Katie Roiphe’s *Still She Haunts Me* (2002), Mick Jackson’s *The Underground Man* (1997) and Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002).
 4. I am using the “chronology of *Wuthering Heights*” prepared by critic Stuart Daley for the Third Norton Critical Edition of *Wuthering Heights* and reprinted in the Fourth (Daley 2003: 357-361).
 5. I follow here Sandra M. Gilbert’s lead: “To distinguish the second Catherine from the first without obliterating their similarities, we will call Catherine Earnshaw Linton’s daughter Catherine II throughout this discussion” (Gilbert 2000: 675, fn. 22).
 6. The same device is used in Valerie Martin’s *Mary Reilly* (1990), a coquel of Stevenson’s 1886 all-male *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* retold by a maid. It was adapted for cinema by Stephen Frears in 1996, with Julia Roberts in the title role and John Malkovich as Jekyll/Hyde.
 7. James Hafley, for one, sees Nelly, and not Heathcliff, as the real villain of the story (see Hafley 1958: 201 and *passim*).
 8. Another exception can be found in Jane Urquhart’s *Changing Heaven* (1990), another “transformation” of *Wuthering Heights* which also “resists the temptation to explain its original, neither offering truth nor resolving enigmas”, but instead playing “with place, time, words and history” and demanding “a reading like poetry, with attention to single words” (Stoneman 1996: 249). More usual re-writings include, among others, Lin Haire-Sargeant’s *H: The Story of Heathcliff’s Journey Back to Wuthering Heights* (1992), Emma Tennant’s *Heathcliff’s Tale* (2005), Caryl Phillips’s *The Lost Child* (2015), or even Terry Eagleton’s 1992 essay ‘Emily Brontë and the Great Hunger’.
 9. Emma Tennant’s *Heathcliff’s Tale*, for instance, includes a very explicit love-making scene between Catherine and Heathcliff, witnessed and narrated by Isabella Linton, (see Tennant 2005: 97-98).
 10. Kohlke and Gutleben contend that “biofiction readers are implicitly asked to compare and contrast their prior knowledge with the narrative design and its particular construction of subjectivity” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 10, fn. 14).

This is also very relevant of course to fictional re-writings of novels and characters. Part of the pleasure of reading re-writings is to compare the source-text and its re-telling and to identify and analyse the differences between the two.

11. For example, in *The Lost Child*, Phillips “goes as far as to suggest that Heathcliff is indeed Earnshaw’s son, instead of being a usurper” (Král 2019: 55), and is thus Hindley and Catherine’s half-brother. Tennant even doubles the incestuous link between the characters, not only by making Heathcliff Mr. Earnshaw’s son but also by revamping Catherine II as Heathcliff’s daughter. She even has the demonic Heathcliff exclaim: “My Cathy – my little Cathy – is my daughter, and I begot her on my sister. She weds Linton tomorrow...” (Tennant 2005: 160, original ellipse): marrying her to his son by Isabella Linton is thus, so to speak, incest squared. Lin Haire-Sargeant’s novel also suggests, albeit less explicitly, that Cathy II is Heathcliff’s daughter by having Mr Lockwood remark “on her extraordinary dark eyes (Haire-Sargeant 1992: 130), “a clue unmissed by the reader because Heathcliff’s eyes are often described as such throughout the sequel” (Van Der Meer 2004: 80).
12. “Scriptotherapy” is a term coined by Suzette Henke and defined as “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (Henke 1998: xii). Henke sees it as providing an alternative therapy for women, and especially women writers like Colette, Hilda Doolittle, Anais Nin, Janet Frame, Audre Lorde, and Sylvia Fraser, whose autobiographical writings she studies, all of whom suffered from “post-traumatic disorder after a crisis precipitated by rape, incest, childhood sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancy, pregnancy-loss, or a severe illness that threatens the integrity of the body and compromises the sense of mastery that aggregates around western notions of harmonious selfhood” (Henke 1998: xii). This can clearly apply here to the fictional Nelly also.
13. This is the case, for example, in D. M. Thomas’ *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000), where Mr. Rochester, an icon of Victorian masculinity, is in fact impotent.
14. Alison Case herself says that while she “wasn’t trying self-consciously to imitate Emily Brontë’s voice”, “writing in a more generalized early Victorian style actually [came] easily to [her]” because she has spent much of her life “immersed in it”, as an avid reader and a Professor of Victorian Literature (Case 2016b: 477, 479). Pastiche is another common point between this autofictional re-writing and biofictions: “Pastiche, or the imitation or simulation of historical voices and documents, of course, concerns practically

all neo-Victorian life-writing, constructing an ambiguous relation to its primary sources, which are sometimes authentically reproduced or sometimes faked or forged” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 30).

15. The term “life-writing” was coined by Virginia Woolf to describe her own autobiographical essays and was later used by feminist critics “to challenge the traditional limits of autobiography through the use of a category that encompasses memoirs, diaries, letters and journals, as well as the bildungsroman and other personally inflected fictional texts” (Henke 1998: xiii).

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