George Eliot's Private Lives and Public Persona: The Biofictional Afterlives of a "Master of Pretence" and Versatile Realist

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Abstract:
Eliot's literary afterlife is not such a widespread phenomenon as Dickens's afterlife. Fictions rewriting Eliot have exploited the author's unconventional life and been studied as melodramas, while more recently, Rebecca Mead's *The Road to Middlemarch* (2014) and Patricia Duncker's *Sophie and the Sibyl* (2015) have proven more ambitious by welding biographical data with celebrity biofiction. This article adds Kathy O'Shaughnessy's *In Love with George Eliot* (2019) to the two above-mentioned works to investigate their generic fluidity, from auto/biography to autobiografiction. Even if there is a core of ascertained facts concerning the historical figure that are found almost unchanged in the three texts, the shift from Eliot as Eminent Victorian to her postmodern textual inscription as neo-character reveals dissonant facets. The resulting composite kaleidoscope borrows from diverse epistemological fields: historiography, literary romanticism, visual and material culture, or even musicology. Authorship is explored from a whole spectrum, ranging from the financial management of an artist career to the cult of numinous inspiration. The common feature between these three different revisionist texts, however, lies in their attempt to democratise Eliot's magisterial voice.

Keywords: auto/biography, biografiction, George Eliot, frame-breaking, genre fluidity, intersemiotic crossovers, Marianolatry, transfiction.

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There is probably no 'After Eliot' phenomenon comparable to the 'After Dickens' one. Yet, the run-up to the writer's bicentenary triggered the publication of various works. Three of them, spanning a publication period from 2014 to 2019, come under study in what follows. They are perfect illustrations of a tendency Margaret Harris has observed: "The interaction of George Eliot's life and art has been a persistent concern of the relatively few contributions to her afterlife" (Harris 2016: 62). Indeed, Rebecca Mead's *The Road to Middlemarch: My Life with George Eliot* (2014), first published in

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the U.S. as *My Life in Middlemarch* (2014), Patricia Duncker's *Sophie and the Sibyl: A Victorian Romance* (2015), and Kathy O'Shaughnessy's *In Love with George Eliot: A Novel* (2019) put George Eliot at the centre of what can be labelled 'fiction/faction'.[1] Of the first two texts, Laura Savu Walker notes that they "resurrect and reimagine the celebrated Victorian and her works for new generations of twenty-first century readers" (Savu Walker 2020: 135). The commitment to embracing both the writer and her works in hybrid texts leads to a variety of approaches. It results in a generic plasticity or porosity, evidenced in the books' subtitles: *A Novel* or *A Victorian Romance*. Even the change from *My Life in Middlemarch* to *The Road to Middlemarch* has generic repercussions, from life writing, a comparatively loose category as will be argued later, to Bakhtinian chronotope, a much tighter one.[2]

1. Mirroring the Figure of the Author

Works rewriting George Eliot, both the historical figure and her oeuvre, confront a series of paradoxes. As a champion of realism, which she largely contributed to revitalising, the Victorian novelist pleaded for an effacement of the self. Put differently, her life in itself was not worthy of interest, a claim which she makes emphatically at the beginning of Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* (1859). The image of the mirror is used to convey the writer's absolute commitment to reflecting life outside, denying herself in the process: "my strongest effort is […] to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (Eliot 2003: 151). Interestingly, the same image of the mirror has been used to theorise neo-Victorianism but with a different meaning. Indeed, the mirror does not stand as the ideal of unmediated, transparent reflection, as with Eliot, but instead expresses the opposite idea: "we never encounter the Victorians themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving" (Joyce 2007: 4). Yet, Eliot is also seen as an intrusive, overbearing presence in her fictions, prone to lecture and guide readers unduly. This is the so-called "magisterial authorial interjection" (Mead 2014: 55) or magisterial voice (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 311), which the Modernists found so aggravating. Another paradox lies in the fact that, although Eliot never explicitly made her life the content of her fictions, as she constantly put forward literature and the arts as a means to reach out to others – "What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?" (Eliot 2019: 691) – her life has all the components of a Victorian melodrama. Among other

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things, it is characterised by alienation in the wake of her apostasy, her sinful union with a married companion, and her late marriage with a man more than twenty years younger, to say nothing of her complacent, not to say encouraging, attitude towards her lesbian admirers (see Ashton 1996: 308).

Eliot's afterlife, more than Charles Dickens's, Jane Austen's, or Charlotte and Emily Brontë's, almost exclusively covers her unconventional existential choices. Dinitia Smith's *The Honeymoon* (2016) follows the path of fictions bearing on Eliot's late marriage with John Walter Cross, in the aftermath of the death of George Henry Lewes, her longtime life-companion. They include Terence de Vere White's *Johnnie Cross* (1983) and Deborah Weisgall's *The World Before Her* (2008). Diana Souhami's *Gwendolen* (2014) comes closer to the works analysed here because it interweaves Eliot's biography tightly with the plot of *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Actually, though, Souhami's fiction is triggered by the novelist's dissatisfaction with the plot of the Victorian writer's penultimate work, which a number of critics regard as her major achievement. Gwendolen rewrites/re-rights the story in this sequel and introduces Eliot and Lewes, who show up at Sir Hugo Mallinger's Christmas party at Topping Abbey. So, through a metaleptic leap, the dividing line between life (*bio*) and fiction (*fabula)* is erased as if, through postmortem irony, the overbearing, intrusive novelist could reappear simply as *bona fide* character in the work she once authored. Meanwhile the Jewish American writer, Cynthia Ozick, dedicated a section of *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997), entitled 'The Puttermesser Paired', to the unique relationship between the two Georges: George Eliot and George Lewes.[3]

While she has been the subject of many biographies over the past one-and-a-half centuries, lately George Eliot has also become a source of inspiration for biofiction – a hybrid form conjoining authentic life data and narrative extrapolation or invention. It is, of course, impossible to survey all the biographies which Eliot's eventful life has inspired within the compass of this study; however, it is interesting to remark, albeit briefly, that they reflect the major shifts that have characterised a constantly evolving genre. Eliot's first biographer was none other than the husband she married late in her life; John Walter Cross's *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* (1885) is a hagiographic document in which the recently widowed young man emphasises the author's emotional dependency on him. It has proven hugely influential, and Gordon Haight, whose *George Eliot: A Biography* (1968) later became the standard reference on the writer, is

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indebted to this first biographic source. More recently, biographies of Eliot have adopted more thorough and specialised perspectives, and interestingly, the biofictions under study in this article claim their indebtedness to some of them. In *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fictions* (1994), Rosemarie Bodenheimer explores the links between the author's private life and the public persona she fashioned for herself as her celebrity grew. Rosemary Ashton wrote biographies of both Eliot and G. H. Lewes, which enabled the biographer to document the couple's mutual, reciprocal influence and, overall, the import of German philosophy in their respective works. The paths chosen by these contemporary biographies constantly diversify, and some of them resonate strongly with the biofictions under consideration here. Kathleen McCormack's *George Eliot in Society: Travels Abroad and Sundays at the Priory* (2013), for example, is chiefly concerned with identifying places, which is at once consonant with the late-nineteenth-century tradition of literary geography and with topobiography, its twenty-first-century development, whilst proving especially relevant to Mead's biofiction and its emphasis on space.

The fact that Eliot, perhaps to a higher degree than some of her contemporaries, used to couch her life experiences in diaries, notebooks, and her correspondence qualifies her for biofiction right from the beginning, as it is next to impossible to disentangle her existence from its written trace. Through their emphasis on the metaliterary, the three works under study mark a rupture with melodramatic fictions on George Eliot's life. They each engage both with Eliot's dedication to literary creation as consubstantial with her life and with the influence her art had on the subjective experience of three contemporary women writers. The common point between the three works under scrutiny would be a concern with literature as a formative, collaborative, and therapeutic activity, effacing the contours of separate individual selves to allow for a shared experience of embodied reading. This shared artistic agenda is cogent with Eliot's ideal of sympathy. Derived from Ludwig Feuerbach, it posits that the arts and literature afford a wonderful conduit to go beyond the limitations of the self: "Art is the nearest to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bonds of our personal lot" (Eliot 1990c: 110).

O'Shaughnessy's *In Love with George Eliot*, though the most recently published, is probably also the most predictable as it partakes both of the campus novel[4] and fictionalised biography. Three academics plan a

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symposium on Eliot before travelling to a conference in Venice. However, in this two-tier narrative, pride of place is granted to the Victorian novelist's personal life, affected by her successes but also by her setbacks. In many respects, Mead's *The Road to Middlemarch* could be read as a revision of the female *Bildungsroman*, or perhaps *Künstleroman*, in which the contemporary writer retrospectively evokes her emotional, affective, and intellectual progress from girlhood to adulthood. Her personal trajectory is shaped by an unflinching passion for Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-72), which she reads at key moments in her life. Reading is presented as a two-way process, one being Mead's conscious cognitive activity, the other referring to the more intangible effects operated on her (sub/un)conscious by the text: "The book was reading me, as I was reading it" (Mead 2014: 5). To some extent, the reversibility of the premise is Mead's original contribution. In typical postmodernist ludic and parodic overkill, Duncker theatrically stages Eliot as the Sibyl (of Mercia)[5] to have her spectacularly upstaged by a challenger, the eponymous Sophie, who has probably more derring-do than wisdom, but who nonetheless affords the contemporary novelist a moment of gloating jubilation.

The reader contributes to the multiplicity of ever shifting angles on George Eliot for, as Duncker's narrator puts it plainly: "So it seems to me that we can choose who we become in relation to her [Eliot]" (Duncker 2016: 244). The three texts under consideration qualify as neo-Victorian primarily because they topple one "Eminent Victorian" from her pedestal, thus "blurring the distinctions between us and those no-longer-Othered Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 24). They demonstrate each in their own way how Eliot is "at once ghostly and tangible" and remains "a strong affective presence" (Kaplan 2007: 5), chiefly by investing the private sphere of a public figure. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, after being ostracised by the Modernists as a sanctimonious moraliser, Eliot is no longer Othered because she is made to fit the agenda of current literary trends, from barely fictionalised confession sealing the return of the subject to playful fiction juggling with the canon to achieve a form of savvy sincerity.

This article is concerned with Eliot's plural facets in the early twenty-first century. First the (trans)generic characteristics of the three texts will be investigated. For the purpose of the analysis the three works have not been labelled as fiction because that would be reductive. What literary templates accommodate these recreations of the Victorian writer? How do they inform

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and possibly renew the reception of this canonical figure? Then textual structure is investigated at close range as there is an attempt in each case to propound an internal architecture befitting a singular vision of Eliot. For obvious reasons the shift from historical Victorian novelist to contemporary metafictional character is one of the major issues at stake and, far from being restricted to a matter of aesthetic choice, the question proves both ontological and ideological. Finally, the intrinsic ambivalence of this author as character, overlaid with interpretations, will be addressed. How do these revisions afford a mutation from the icon or Sibyl to the reader's confidante?

2. Auto/biography/Biografiction

Each of the three texts studied exposes a self-referential concern for their generic affiliation as if the simple fact of making George Eliot their chief protagonist destabilised traditional landmarks. Katie Boyd, one of the contemporary academics in O'Shaughnessy's *In Love with George Eliot,* is very explicit on that score; concerning Eliot, she bluntly states: "Still, there are certain things we can never quite know" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 9). Of her own literary undertaking, she observes that "[m]ine is a novel, but a novel based on fact—biography, letters, diaries" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 9). Whereas the project of her new colleague Ann Leavitt, also an Eliot scholar, falls squarely inside a well-identified pigeonhole – "Ann's book is a critique of Eliot's feminism, which sounds quite political" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 9) – Katie's occupies some undefined limbo. The reader understands that Katie is an intradiegetic stand-in for O'Shaughnessy and that her work in progress is none other than the book being read. The fictionalised George Eliot is shown holding cut and dried opinions on biographies, as reported by her companion Lewes: "Biographers! She hates the idea of people writing about her" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 236). Ironically, this almost seems to disclaim O'Shaughnessy's own work. What emerges is Eliot's commitment to altruistic sympathy and her aversion for whatever smacks of egotism and narcissism.

Alexandre Gefen recalls that the term biofiction, in contradistinction to biography, was coined by Alain Buisine in 1992 (Gefen 2005: 305). It designates both "biographical fiction", i.e. the life story of an imaginary character, for example, Paul Michel in Patricia Duncker's *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996)[6] or "fictional biographies", the (partly) imaginary lives of real persons. A constellation of terms addresses the latter phenomenon. Aleid

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Fokkema speaks of "novel[s] in disguise: Postmodern biography" (Fokkema 1999: 42). Naomi Jacobs mentions "fiction biography": "a focused, fully fictional treatment of a limited period of life of a historical figure" (Jacobs 1990: xix), and Savu Walker aptly notices that labels such as "fictions of the author", "novels about authors" or "author fictions" range from "ventriloquist biographies to pseudo-memoirs" (Savu Walker 2006: vi).

Admittedly, the three works under study belong *mutatis mutandis* to this complex category, even if the degree of narrative invention as opposed to factual data varies between the three. It is higher in *Sophie and the Sibyl*, which flaunts what Dorrit Cohn calls "signposts of fictionality" (Cohn 1990: 775),[7] than in the other two. According to Gefen, biofiction is symptomatic of contemporary culture characterised by a renewed interest in the subject, which had been abolished by structuralism, but whose identity is now shaped by textuality (Gefen 2005: 305). The narrativisation of the self precludes any essentialisation of any prior individuality. Biofiction also prioritises intimate experience accessed through a close observation of quotidian life. The anthropological concern with objects to reconfigure human environment is also key to reimagining the subject in a quasi-objective manner. O'Shaughnessy, for example, attempts to convey the material conditions in which writing took place by using Lewes as a focaliser: "Entering Marian's study. Lewes stopped. […] She had a pair of scissors in her hand, cutting. […] At last! Seated at her desk, facing the window, writing" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 172-173). Furthermore, biofiction also partakes of the postmodernist manipulation of knowledge. *Sophie and the Sibyl* is the perfect illustration of this trend through its metafictional montage resulting in a cubist portrait of Eliot. Indeed, right from the paratext, the so-called Sibyl is presented successively through the eyes of Charles Eliot Norton, an American scholar; Charles Darwin's son, George; and the narrator who, through an extradiegetic intrusion, comments on the intentions of the author, i.e. Duncker. The latter happens to bear the same name as the renowned publisher who made Eliot accessible to German speaking readers.

A final aspect of biofiction, which is crucial to this corpus, lies in the leaps from one ontological plane to another, through the process of metalepsis. Mead constantly interlaces ontological levels by eschewing any demarcating lines between Eliot's diaries, the world of the fictions the Victorian novelist creates, and Mead's own recollections, mostly nurtured by her immersive reading of *Middlemarch*. For example, *The Mill on the Floss*

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(1860), through its romantic emphasis on childhood memories, coloured by the tang and flavour of landscapes forever lost, allows a fusion between life, fiction and anamnesis, couched in personal writings. So in *The Road to Middlemarch*, Mead thinks back to her own childhood through descriptive passages of Maggie's and Tom's ramblings, which Eliot could never have invented had she not discovered Radipole Mill. Mead, for her part, remarks that "[w]hen I was the age of Maggie Tulliver I went to school in Radipole" (Mead 2014: 251), and this process of remembering is conducive to maturity. In the final resort Mead and Eliot become one as the narrator recounts the different steps of her development *with* Eliot, before acknowledging that Eliot is actually *in* herself: "For Eliot, being sensitive to one's memories of childhood is a sign of moral maturity" (Mead 2014: 253).

The use of metalepsis is even more daring in *Sophie and the Sibyl* as transfictional practices[8] are constant. Julius Klesmer and Miss Arrowpoint migrate from *Daniel Deronda*'s plot into the fiction invented by Duncker, to spice up the Lewes's sojourn in Germany. On the other hand, Hans Meyrick, Daniel Deronda's friend from his days in Cambridge, becomes the successful society portrait painter who never quite succeeds in capturing the Sibyl's likeness because she postpones her sitting sessions on account of her poor health. The entanglement between fictional levels and authentic life data spirals out of control.

In the blurring of generic categories, entailed by biofiction, tampering with chronology is frequent. In O'Shaughnessy's *In Love with George Eliot*, Edith Simcox, Eliot's devoted worshipper, both in real life and the fiction of real life, confides her difficulty in defining the nature of what she is writing. In hindsight, it turns out to have the characteristics of a (proto-)biofiction, over a century before the term was actually conceptualised: "She had developed a hybrid, a partly autobiographical kind of fiction, with thinly disguised references to Marian" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 322).

In *Self Impression: Life-Writing and Autobiografiction* (2012), Max Saunders argues that the expression 'life writing' came out when the distinction between biography and autobiography became less and less perceptible (Saunders 2012: 4). Whilst O'Shaughnessy still maintains the gap between the contemporary frame narrative and Eliot's minimally fictionalised biography, Mead illustrates this fusion between biography and autobiography observed by Saunders. *The Road to Middlemarch* seamlessly blends a survey of Eliot's life indistinguishable from her oeuvre, which is documented thanks

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to authorised critical sources, and Mead's coming of age story and chronicle of adulthood, achieved through reading as crucial to identity formation. Margaret Harris uses the term "bibliomemoir", which she opposes to "fandom", to qualify this profound intimate link with an author woven over the years (Harris 2019: 256). In the prelude, Mead grapples with the definition of what she is attempting to do. She arrives at a two-pronged metatextual conclusion. As she sees it, her work is a hermeneutics of biography: "What if I tried to discern the ways in which George Eliot's life shaped her fiction, and how her fiction shaped her?" (Mead 2014: 9) And it also qualifies as auto/biography (with the tell-tale slash in the middle), demonstrating "the way a book can insert itself into a reader's own history, into a reader's own life story, until it's hard to know what one would be without it" (Mead 2014: 16).[9] In the first case, fiction and life are commingled; in the second, life is seen as his/herstory nurtured by textual memory. *Sophie and the Sibyl* would probably qualify as "autobiografiction":

> Postmodern theories of subjectivity as constituted through narrative, combined with its scepticism about both subjectivities and about grand narratives, have renewed the sense of the indistinguishability of autobiography and fiction; and thus also the energies of autobiografiction. (Saunders 2012: 293)

The collapse of grand narratives is immediately perceptible through the text's threshold with its three epigraphs; two allographic – Charles Eliot Norton and George Darwin – one autographic in which the narrator, who incidentally has not embarked on her story-telling task yet, appraises her author's intentions. More precisely, the narrator's remarks underscore both the proximity and antagonism between Eliot and Duncker, which galvanise the ensuing narrative. This narratological foreplay flaunts the "vindictive little game" (Duncker 2016: n.p.) that is about to follow, eschewing the likelihood of any celebratory canonisation of the Victorian sage. So an intergenerational conflict, mitigated by Duncker's love for her artistic foremother, is about to be played out. It is set out in terms reminiscent of Bloom's theory of "anxiety of influence", as Duncker's "voice comes alive paradoxically, never by mere imitation but in the agonistic misprision performed upon powerful forerunners by only the most gifted of their successors" (Bloom 1997: xxiv).

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The measure of the success achieved by the successor, Duncker, in this amicable contest, is of course for the reader to decide.

However, hagiography is prevented by "misprision", i.e. the defensive distortion in reaction against the precursor's oeuvre. There are indeed quite a few instances of such "misprision" in Duncker's text. For example, Eliot's prose is not so much ventriloquised as rid of its solemn erudition, and the Victorian novelist is carried over into a totally different fictitious universe, in which the slow, accretive accumulation of causes and effects, which Gillian Beer showed as related to uniformitarianism (Beer 2000: 169), is superseded by a hugely enjoyable madcap romp. The trigger for this revisionist text is an odd coincidence; Eliot's German publisher was the writer's namesake, one Franz Duncker (Ashton 1996: 303). Besides, the contemporary writer plays still further with generic taxonomies by subtitling her maverick narrative "*A Victorian Romance*". In doing so, she asserts her preference for the repressed side of Eliot who, in Duncker's estimation, never gave up on her "jolly good taste for melodrama" (Duncker 2016: 30), even if she is mostly remembered as an intellectually demanding author who pioneered a renewed take on realism, premised on truth-telling as a moral imperative.

3. 'Notes on Form in Art'

In an 1868 essay entitled 'Notes on Form in Art', Eliot propounded her aesthetic ideal of fiction as made up of discrete parts, related to each other so as to form a superorganic whole. For the Victorian novelist, literary form is defined relationally as "wholes composed of parts more and more multiplied and highly differenced, yet more and more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common likeness or mutual dependence" (Eliot 1990b: 232). Her novels prolong her theoretical reflections within the fabric of imaginary narrative: "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending" (Eliot 2019: 779). The pithy statement initiates a process of Derridean *différance* and, by the same token, through its implied liminality, it condenses the "going forward, looking backward" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 32), Janus-like stance of neo-Victorianism.

Even if this is not their most frequently investigated aspect, 'fictional biographies' or Savu's earlier cited "author fictions" do raise interesting questions of narrative structure or economy. There is a parallel evolution between a loosening of the constraints of biography and the coterminous development of biofiction; in both cases formal emancipation allows for

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inventiveness in shaping texts. Hermione Lee points out that biography, which is hardly a genre *per se*, has undergone major changes over the last hundred years (Lee 2005: 11-13). Eliot belonged to an age when biography was often synonymous with panegyric or hagiography, bestowing a *finis coronat opus* upon an exemplary destiny. John Walter Cross, Eliot's first official husband, authored this type of celebratory testament in *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*. Lee observes that now readers expect "a warts-and-all picture which should include the representation of 'the minute details of daily life'" (Lee 2004: 4). Such a widening of the spectrum of the representable influences the structure of biography. So, whilst still abiding by chronology, biographies increasingly experiment with form. For example, in *Dickens* (1990), Peter Ackroyd inserts short fiction fragments between his book's nonfiction chapters.

Biofiction is even more exploratory, probably because it is less constrained by a long tradition. It is also contemporary with the crisis of so-called grand narratives and the deconstructive approach of postmodernist texts. It comes in the wake of the calling into question of the unified subject or transcendental ego and therefore adopts a new stance on authors (a most contentious notion in itself!) by foregrounding textuality as a site of negotiation between the biographer and the biographee, who happens to be a writer too in Eliot's case. It is the shaping and resulting architecture of the three "author fictions" under scrutiny that this second section investigates, from the assumption that the way these texts are structured is inseparable from reading the author *as text*, and through her constantly reconfigured textual inscriptions.

Through the chronotope of the road, a variation on the memory lane trope, Mead gestures intertextually towards Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), a paradigmatic female *Bildungsroman*, itself based upon John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) (see Mead 2014: 271). Structurally, the narrative is premised on analogies asymptotically driving towards the romantic encounter between two soulmates, with the narrator revealed to herself through Eliot and Eliot's afterlife revealed through the narrator. Spatial displacements, undergirding the narrative arc, and overlaps between the Victorian level and the contemporary one, are repeated. Mary Ann Evans leaves Nuneaton for Coventry and then London while the narrator leaves the backwater town in the southwest of England where she spent her childhood for New York to do a degree in journalism. The sense of place is seminal, and

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one of the structuring analogies is between the territory of the novel and Mead's immediate environment. It is decisive in as much as location is constitutive of a mindscape: "novels are places in which authors explore their own subjectivity" (Mead 2014: 9). The common ground shared by Eliot and Mead is "middling Englishness" (Mead 2014: 32), not so much a definite environment as a state of mind or a well-preserved memory.

Mead's life story falls squarely within *Middlemarch*'s architecture: the eight book titles from the serialised Victorian fiction signpost the different stages of Mead's growth to maturity and into early adulthood. This is, of course, a significant aesthetic choice as Eliot's fiction becomes, as it were, a metaphoric biotope. The title of the American edition: *My Life in Middlemarch* underscores this aspect, while the English one is more focused on the march of progress, an outdated notion today. In fact, though, both Eliot, who was not naive enough to endorse any half-baked conception of life's improvement in a new modern era, and the narrator, find a compromise. For Eliot it lies in meliorism, i.e., the pragmatic conviction that the world can only be improved by human efforts, and for Mead in the realisation that "[b]eing absolutely sure that one is right is part of growing up, and so is realizing, years later, that the truth might be more nuanced" (Mead 2014: 69). Interestingly, Mead's finale, which is perfectly consistent with Eliot's, throws into stark relief the negation of *telos*: Dorothea Brooke is no Saint Theresa kicking the heathenish Moors out of Spain, and the contemporary narrator finds solace not in a career of renown but in the simplicity of a domestic scene. For Eliot the "epic life" is but an anachronistic threshold to the novel, while the "home epic" is what is acknowledged at the end of the road (Eliot 2019: 3, 779). For the twenty-first-century woman, there is no such idealised reference to start off with, and what is realised at the end of the literary journey is expressed more bluntly than in Eliot's coda: "Acts are unhistoric; lives are hidden; tombs are unvisited—all is unmarked and unnoticed" (Mead 2014: 270).

Experienced as a natural, albeit textual, habitat, biofiction is an idea that ties in neatly with Eliot's concept of organic milieu exposed in 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), her essay on Wilhelm von Riehl. Riehl sees the German people as living in close symbiosis with their immediate geographical environment, determined by the climate, and as being "incarnate history" (Eliot 1990c: 136), through the subtle ramifications of their dialects and phraseology, which have run through their veins from time immemorial. Through its fluid circulation from the record of Mead's life

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story to Eliot's oeuvre and its many ramifications opened at different stages of her existence, the structure of *The Road to Middlemarch* adumbrates a process of literary incubation and acculturation, which could be labelled 'incarnate biofiction'. Indeed, the botanical and biological terminology holds true both for the genesis of Eliot's creation – "the germination and growth of *Middlemarch*" – and for the narrator's physical and intellectual coming of age. Mead's narrator is therefore brought into existence through *Middlemarch*, contrary to Dorothea who "comes into the world fully developed, like a second Minerva" (Mead 2014: 40).

In sum, *The Road to Middlemarch*'s structure constructs a representation of Eliot as coterminous with Mead's story of development and chronicle of early adulthood, as if the two women, though one century-and-a-half apart, were in fact consubstantial. This superimposition of two destinies is condensed in the coda through two successive paragraphs forming a diptych. The narrator is sitting in her study lined with bookshelves, looking out of the window whilst she recalls a citation from Eliot: "Imagine me seated near a window, opening upon a verandah" (Eliot qtd. in Mead 2014: 278). This reminiscence is proof of the vividness of *Middlemarch* in Mead's mind. There is indeed for Dorothea the desire to go beyond "the still, white enclosure which made her visible world" and to extend "the sense of connexion with a manifold pregnant existence" (Eliot 2019: 257). Likewise, Mead's quasi-exclusive engagement with *Middlemarch* is an opening, a reaching out towards the world at large.

If everything in *The Road to Middlemarch* points towards oneness and unity, *In Love with George Eliot* rests upon a principle of duality inscribed right from the title. The absence of the loving subject in it, i.e. 'X(?) *In Love With*…', allows for the possibility that quite a few of the novel's protagonists may endorse the role, and more broadly, that anyone reading the text may indeed become the amorous partner.

Following the dual pattern informing *In Love with George Eliot* throughout, Eliot's endeavour to bring her Renaissance characters to life in *Romola* (1862) resonates with O'Shaughnessy's intentions to give the Victorian writer a new lease on life. The text may be seen as a revival of Pygmalion's myth, consisting in bringing "statue-like figures from an alien age to life" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 160). Granted, the Victorian era may not be such an alien age, but it must preserve a degree of tantalising Otherness to entice neo-Victorian researchers, and Eliot *is* undoubtedly statue-like, as

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evidenced by Mead alluding to her one-day's trip to Nuneaton where she saw the Sibyl's bronze statue (see Mead 2014: 32). Precisely, this attempt to "mock [the reader] with art" by cutting breath with a fine chisel (Shakespeare 2010: Act V, Scene 5, 244) could condense O'Shaughnessy's purpose.[10] It is reminiscent of Jules Michelet's historiography and his ambition to convey to the greatest number of people the dull reverberations of the emotions of those they never knew. This is history as palingenesis, i.e. regeneration from decay and ashes, thanks to the close physical bond established with the past. Mead for her part speaks of a "tactile encounter" (Mead 2014: 8). For O'Shaughnessy, palingenesis, the resurrection of the past, takes a theatrical form. Indeed, descriptive passages setting the context and introspective moments of reflection alternate with dramatised scenes in which Eliot is shown interacting with visitors. A number of such scenes, calling to mind the pictorial tradition of 'conversation pieces', display face-to-face exchanges between the intradiegetic novelist and some of her famous close friends: Barbara Bodichon, Maria Congreve, Bessie Rayner Parkes or Georgiana Burne-Jones and others. Lewes is shown as the master of ceremonies, "feel[ing] like a successful theatre impresario, who each week pulled off an improbable yet delightful entertainment" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 165-166).

Patricia Waugh remarks that in *Adam Bede* the narrator's "moralistic commentary, interpretation and appeals to the reader […] *reinforce* the connection between the real and the fictional world, *reinforce* the reader's sense that one is a continuation of the other" (Waugh 2001: 32, original emphasis). The impression is one of unity and overall consistency. *In Love with Goerge Eliot*, in spite of its fairly conventional structure, is imbued with a postmodernist awareness of the constructedness of what is taken for reality. In other words, a split is introduced because the reader is constantly conscious of the imaginary act necessary to call up a plausible, but never ascertained, representation of the way scenes of Eliot's life could have taken place. The uncertainty, however minimal, concerning the correspondence between what is recreated and what is bound to remain forever irretrievable, persists. And this is, of course, decisive for the perception of the figure of the author too. But there are ways in which this self-reflexivity is made even more palpable. This starts with a proto-postmodernist take on the Victorian writer herself who owns up to her split self, which turns out to be programmatic for the whole fiction/faction. Her putative words are reported by Herbert Spencer: "You said to me, one day, that you suffered from a double consciousness […]

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that you listened to yourself in a critical way. You were, in your own words, split in two" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 65). This confession amounts to what Waugh defines as literary self-consciousness. Eliot perceives herself potentially as text, or at least as cues couched on paper and open for interpretation.

Frame-breaking is a metafictional process which O'Shaughnessy constantly resorts to. It applies in particular to the genesis of serendipitous textual invention. O'Shaughnessy recalls the shift from 'Armgart' (1870), the poem Eliot wrote about an opera singer who craves for celebrity but loses her voice before fading into insignificance, to Dorothea, the young woman who asserts her voice and finds her path through life (see O'Shaughnessy 2019: 194-197). Eliot's acts of literary creation, depicted as simultaneous with the act of reading, are juxtaposed with the academic's activities of research reported live by Boyd. This provides a transhistorical testimony of the technical mutations over the years: Eliot with ink and paper, Boyd with her laptop, emailing, scanning, and clicking.

> Five minutes later, I receive an email back: *It's beautiful. Is that why you sent it?*
> I type: *I think it's her* [George Eliot's] *first heartfelt feminist plea.*
> I press send.
> I email again: *Coming directly from her own experience. i.e. not ideas.* (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 193, original italics)

As per the above example, this interest in material culture inflects the narrative's structure and even determines some of the page layouts.

Sophie and the Sibyl's salient feature is decentrement. This entails not letting the Victorian author occupy the same central position as she does in the two other texts. Once again, the title is telling as Eliot shares the top billing with another, and the titular word "Sibyl" itself elicits conflicted responses, both "reverent awe (as 'majestic' icon) *and* comic dismissal" (Savu 2020: 139, original emphasis). Said differently, in Duncker's biofiction Eliot is not so much the centripetal linchpin as *one of* the main protagonists – and an antagonist – in a not so firmly anchored author fiction. If decentrement is the overarching principle, it plays centrifugally in different directions: geographic, historic, diegetic, intertextual, and intermedial, through the

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musicological comments on Richard Wagner. This opening of a range of perspectives acts as an incitement to read the canonical figure against the grain, without demystifying her totally though.

Unlike *The Road to Middlemarch*, where middling Englishness is central, and *In Love with George Eliot*, where London occupies pride of place, *Sophie and the Sibyl* starts in Berlin, before moving on to Homburg, Stuttgart, and later Rome. One tangentially related subplot reports an archeological expedition to Miletus and Priene in Turkey, whilst the novel makes repeated allusions to *Daniel Deronda*, by far Eliot's most cosmopolitan fiction through its evocation of the Jewish diaspora. Duncker also succumbs to the melodramatic allure of the Crosses' sojourn in Venice, culminating in the "Great Leap" (Duncker 2016: 275) when John Walter Cross, Eliot's young husband and her junior by over twenty years, is reported to have jumped into a canal from the newlyweds' hotel room, just before he was expected to perform his conjugal duties. At first glance, the plotline seems meandering, perhaps even nomadic, even if Mead too touches upon Eliot's international dimension, by evoking the vexed question of Eliot's support of colonialism in passing (see Mead 2014: 95).

Sophie and the Sibyl also juggles with history in disconcerting ways. First by emulating the eighteenth-century technique of heading chapters with epigraphs summing up in pithy, colourful wording their content. Historiography too is unhinged, not so much because Duncker displays metahistorically the forms of emplotments (see White 2015: 1-43) that this discursive mode shares with fiction narratives – romance, comedy, tragedy and satire – as through her inclusion of different epistemologies. For example, anthropological history is introduced through a reference to the noisome smells in the absence of proper lavatories in the nineteenth century: "The faint scent of urine, faeces and dark menstrual blood drifted through the rooms in summer, but without central heating, human excrement seldom festers with flies, as it would now" (Duncker 2016: 31). This passage is strongly reminiscent of the approach John Fowles, whom the narrator criticises for his male phallogocentric perspective, pioneered in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Yet this obsession with *"une histoire vraie"* (Duncker 2016: 26) is not radically opposed to myth. This is a paradox, amply illustrated through *Sophie and the Sibyl*, in which facts, such as biographical and historical data (on Eliot and her entourage and the 1870s) imperceptibly slide into fable (Sophie von Hahn and her fake historian of a father, the fictitious

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author of the fake *Erinnerungen und Erlebnisse: Lebensweg eines Liberalen*). Besides, Max Duncker, one of the biofictional Eliot's two publishers, is proof that for some people "[h]istory readily translated itself into myth" (Duncker 2016: 27). He can be both fascinated by Walter Scott's novels, on the assumption that they related duly documented, authentic, past events, but similarly convinced that, if archeologists dug the spot mentioned by Homer, they would undoubtedly uncover the city of Troy. When pressed by the Sibyl, he goes as far as to claim that history is time-bound and contingent while myth is everlasting and absolute, the husk versus the kernel, as it were (see Duncker 2016: 6). And more generally, *Sophie* is not so much about the tension between fact and fiction as the generative power of historiography to bestow verisimilitude on invented stories. Hence Duncker's text plays upon bogus knowledge and counterfeit erudition.

Instead of using fiction to complement historical data, to fill up the blanks left after collating all possible genuine sources, Duncker freely invents a story that she grafts onto history. This claim for a greater part of freedom in narratives, anchored in the referential, modifies the representation of the biofiction author who finds herself unwittingly caught up in a hair-raising story. When Max Duncker discovers that Sophie has pawned her mother's precious necklace, the Sibyl is led to retrieve it with her own money, barging in a story, which is not strictly speaking her own, and participating in the mayhem. She becomes part of a triangle together with Max and Sophie. In other words, she is taken out of the groove of her historical destiny to find herself led astray in a formulaic plot typical of the "mind-and-millinery fiction" (Eliot 1990d: 140), at odds with the sacrosanct rules of verisimilitude, which as novelist she advocates. This of course destabilises the received image of the highbrow authorial figure.

Structurally the narrative is galvanised by spectacular episodes such as the bathetic operatic performance of *The Flying Dutchman* (1843), in which Julius Klesmer, who has transmigrated from *Daniel Deronda*, conducts the orchestra. All hell breaks loose because two rival gangs oppose each other on the artistic value of Wagner's music. In real life, Eliot's response to Wagner was anything but simple. Ashton recalls that after hearing *Tannhaüser* (1845), Eliot concluded "that 'the music of the future' was not for them [Lewes and herself]; they had not evolved beyond the tadpole stage of appreciation" (Ashton 1996: 302-303). Yet over the years, Eliot's opinion evolved, and she contributed to disseminating the German composer's

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ground-breaking work through her articles in the *Leader* and *Fraser's Magazine.* Nicholas Dames notes that she was interested in studying the effects of Wagner's lengthy pieces of music with their unfamiliar tempi and absence of tonal contrasts on listeners. Later, she took up a more positive stance by using Wagner to experiment with different kinds of repetition in *Daniel Deronda* to make the novel "a considered response to the issues of duration that Wagner had made so prominent in physiological aesthetics" (Dames 2007: 148). Duncker dramatises this aesthetic debate by farcically staging "the Stuttgart catastrophe" induced by "dissolute tonalities" (Duncker 2016: 163). The high is brought down to the low through comedy; however, the intellectual elevation of the issue at stake is not lost totally. Indeed, in *Sophie and the Sibyl*, Duncker breaks up the set-routine of predictable biofictions by juxtaposing different temporalities. She delivers in turn the account of an archeological expedition under the guidance of Professor Marek; the chronicle of the Lewes's journeys in Germany; fragments of the apocryphal Lucian's history of the spread of Christianity in the late Roman Empire and so on. The cyclical time scheme of the embedded 'Ballad of Tam Lin' is framed within the nervous rehearsal before a New Year's party. Moreover, like Eliot with Wagner, the contemporary writer has the intuition of different structures, which may still be only at their nascent stage, when she hints at "the huge spreading fractals of the Phoenix" (Duncker 2016: 147). The phoenix fractals are modifications of the Mandelbrot and Julia sets. From James Joyce to Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* (1993), the possible connections between literature and quantum physics have been investigated. Worthy of interest for *Sophie and the Sibyl* is the cascade effect whereby a pattern is replicated on different scales through hypertextual layerings. Precisely, *Sophie and the Sibyl*'s biofictional Eliot is caught up in this vortex.

4. Eliot the Victorian Novelist and Neo-Victorian Character

George Eliot already demonstrated a metafictional concern with characterisation in her novels: "character […] is a process and an unfolding" (Eliot 2019: 140). This statement denies any preexisting identity and postulates a co-construction of this fictional entity central to novel writing. Each reader has, in a sense, some leeway in imagining her George Eliot – Mead, Duncker and O'Shaughnessy. But George Eliot cannot be simply a fictional character; she has historical foundations. However, due to the temporal distance separating her from twenty-first-century readers, those

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foundations are only written records, made up of signs: "signs are small measurable things, but interpretation is illimitable" (Eliot 2019: 23). This raises the issue of the freedom of "testing the epistemological limits" when writing a biofiction (Kohlke 2013: 4), for example on Eliot, firstly because the outlines of her existence in the referential world are public knowledge and because any biofiction writer is to some extent bound to be answerable to her memory and posterity. The change from historical Victorian novelist to neo-Victorian character has therefore aesthetic, but also ethical stakes.

The three writers start from a number of givens; indubitable facts invariably associated with Eliot: she "is still famous for being hideous" (Duncker 2016: 282); she suffered from a series of ailments; she shared a "writer companionability" with G. H. Lewes (Mead 2014: 194); she was driven by ambition (see O'Shaughnessy 2019: 194-197), and so on. From this core of raw data, a living memory of Eliot has been recorded. This dedication to preserving her trace can take the form of fetishising her into an icon. Both Mead and O'Shaughnessy evoke the George Eliot Museum in Nuneaton (see Mead 2014: 33; O'Shaughnessy 2019: 214). The objects once touched by the real author are conducive to a mental time travel, eliciting the uncanny sensation of being within reach of a spectral presence. Something of "The Presence" (Duncker 2016: 231) – the capitals are purposefully inserted by Duncker – persists through time and unhinges the present like the ghost of Hamlet in Jacques Derrida's *Specter of Marx* (1993) (see Derrida 2006: 9-15). This confirms the more intangible magic or numinous aura emanating from "The Presence", inspiring both adoration and awe in her worshippers, chief among whom Edith Jemima Simcox. Yet fetishising need not be celebratory or hagiographic as it can also lend itself to reversals of perspectives, distortions, hyperboles, or graphic exaggerations. So what matters above all is the degree of commitment to keeping the so-called icon alive.

Juxtaposing the various ways in which the three writers respond to the "signs"[11] of the tangible "Presence" of the author affords a kaleidoscopic experience. Indeed, from a fixed number of traits a constant reconfiguration triggers unpredictable changes of perspectives and tonality – the equivalent of colour in written language. The importance of the visual cannot be ignored, and drawing from *Middlemarch*'s famous metaphor of the candlelit pier-glass, it could be said that Mead, Duncker and O'Shaughnessy hold in turn their candle differently to the Sibyl's specular reflection, to form different

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concentric arrangements from the same scratches on the mirror. For example, Duncker uses different character focalisers, chiefly Max and Sophie, to home in on this topic of ugliness, while Mead ingeniously invalidates the charge: "plain women, after all, have always found partners to love and to be loved by" (Mead 2014: 125). Whilst O'Shaughnessy opts for psychological realism, Duncker expresses a constant awareness of the import of visual culture in the Victorian era. She recalls that when *Middlemarch* first came out in bimonthly installments it was surrounded by advertisements for the cordials, tinctures and boluses which Tertius Lydgate rejected in his new approach to medicine (Duncker 2016: 32). This acute sensitivity to the visual is manifest through Duncker's graphic written style. She has a propensity to favour striking, arresting images, at times evoking cartoons, to entertain readers. For example, the close-up on the Sibyl's teeth (Eliot was known for having bad teeth and excruciating toothaches) runs out of proportion and morphs into a Dantesque scene: "She smiled slightly. The row of revealed teeth gleamed like tusks, yellow, gigantic and uneven. […] One or two gaps appeared, giving the untoppled columns the tragic aspect of a ruined temple" (Duncker 2016: 4).

Each in their different ways, the three texts testify to the phenomenon of celebrity culture so that Eliot finds herself immersed in a social environment common for pop or football stars in the twenty-first century. Jay Clayton documented this long-occulted mercantilism in the case of Dickens: "he did not discriminate between his imaginative gifts and his entrepreneurial acumen" (Clayton 2003: 199). Mead prolongs the argument by quoting Eliot making a satirical observation after visiting Dickens's house on Tavistock Square: "Splendid library, of course, with soft carpets, couches etc. such as become a sympathizer with the suffering classes" (Eliot qtd. in Mead 2014: 117). However, the Madonna, another of Eliot's many names, is not above such charges of moneyed interest herself, even if she was not directly the businesswoman, since it was Lewes, her mountebank of a companion, who saw to such practical details. Both O'Shaughnessy and Duncker tackle this less palatable reality, *In Love with George Eliot* factually, *Sophie and the Sibyl* farcically. In the latter, Lewes is described as "that canny, grasping not-quite husband of hers. He managed her like a racehorse, well-groomed and stabled and only brought out for races where the first prize was above one thousand guineas" (Duncker 2016: 36). This reads like a caption, and the punchline qualifies the statement for the most scathing satirical magazines. In the three works, mention is made of the financial stakes and mercantile

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interests inseparable from the author status, and even Mead, who overall adopts a more romanticised view, remarks in passing that *Romola* had not sold as well as expected, even if Eliot had been paid an enormous advance for it (see Mead 2014: 237). So, the Eliot who emerges from these three revisionist texts is part of this cash nexus and plays well according to its rules. She seems situated somewhere between the moralised political economy of Caleb Garth in *Middlemarch* and the devious manipulation of Bulstrode, the self-righteous banker in the same novel.

Celebrity culture is closely knit with authorship. A good example is the mystery around the author of *Adam Bede*, which leads to all sorts of speculation while arousing the public's curiosity for the book at the same time (see O'Shaughnessy 2019: 82-87). Yet, if the market economy of publishing depends on authorship to stir up customers' interest, there is also a mystic halo surrounding authorship. The Sibyl is lionised in the salons of Duncker and Duncker. She is visited like the Delphic oracle, as if her inspirational glance could work miracles. "The Presence" pulls in sycophants and worshippers. Though she belongs to an Anglican country and was influenced by Evangelism in her youth, Eliot inspires a form of Marianolatry, a variation on Mariolatry, best evidenced by Edith Simcox's acts of worship. This oracular power attached to the Sibyl is allegorised through a reference to one of her most enigmatic works 'The Lifted Veil' (1859), in which the hero Latimer is not "merely sensitive, but supernaturally gifted – able to see with magical clarity into other people" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 69). This all-seeing supernatural force probably corresponds more to the fantasy entertained by nineteenth-century readers about their favourite authors than to Eliot's fantasy of omnipotence though. In *Dombey and Son* (1848), Charles Dickens introduced Asmodeus who lifts up the roofs of the city to see what was going on inside each and every house (see Dickens 1985: 738). Eliot, for her part, was careful not to dissociate the supernaturally gifted Latimer from her moral philosophy. Indeed, in this tale "authorial omniscience is recast as a first-person narrator's diseased and reluctant knowledge of the workings of other minds" (Small 2009: xii).

The most central question for this last part is therefore: how is the author figure carried over from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century? How is the transformation from the part-fact, part-fiction representation of a historical figure into a character conducted by contemporary (post)postmodernist interrogations? Two main directions can be sketched out,

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the first concerning the process of recreation and revision of an artistic figure. The hypothesis put forward in what follows is that Duncker, through the apocryphal historian Lucian, obliquely tackles the issue of the transmission and patrimonialisation of past authors who become emblematic figures for the present. A second line of reflection, as in the three works discussed, concerns the new status of Eliot as belonging to the category of what Catherine Gallagher terms "counterfactual characters" (Gallagher 2011: 316), in other words as a character poised between facts and invention, which in itself postulates an instability, a split, or perhaps even a crisis of the subject. By being brought closer to the reader, Eliot loses, to some extent, the reverential distance which a cultural icon imposes. In these rewrites, George Eliot is up for grabs, as it were, and ready to be fashioned according to the different writers' respective agendas. And, ultimately, there is a move from the magisterial asseverations of "The Presence", brooking no dissent, to the democratised voice of the confidante. This can be seen through Mead's identification with Eliot, as an alter ego. It is noticeable through the private face-to-face exchanges between Eliot and her close female friends forging a special bond with readers in *In Love with George Eliot* – especially when such topics as motherhood are discussed.

The possibility of intersemiotic crossovers between Lucian, the fake Latin historian, and Eliot, is signaled at the beginning of Chapter 13 of *Sophie and the Sibyl*. The narrator reports that two events electrified London in February 1876: the authentication of the statue of Lucian and the first instalment of *Daniel Deronda*, opening on Gwendolen Harleth gambling at the roulette table in Leubronn (see Eliot 1983: 35-40; Duncker 2016: 207). The episode is, of course, the matrix for Duncker's central scene when Sophie van Hahn indulges in the same activity at the Casino in Homburg. The fact that Lucian may be a pretext for Duncker to raise questions on the transmission of intellectual or artistic celebrities' legacy through time soon becomes obvious: "Was it genuine? Or not genuine?" (Duncker 2016: 207). Walter Benjamin's reflection on the 'The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction' (1935) comes to mind as the narrator points out that "identical copies of Lucian's image abounded throughout Antiquity" (Duncker 2016: 207). Admittedly, the Greeks and Romans, through their craft, devised specific ways of replicating works of art, but it was not until the arrival of mechanical reproduction that copying became a mass-produced activity. Benjamin does not question the accuracy of the copy towards the model but

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deplores the absence of presence, or aura, i.e. the lack of the very "Presence" that *Sophie*'s narrator constantly attributes to her recreated Sibyl. Is a postmodern Eliot bound to repeat a set of given characteristics, or is the model's putative identity collapsed through many different revisionist texts?

Gallagher refers to "counterfactual characters" to distinguish them from historical and fictional characters. Biofiction introduces a hybrid form of neo-characterisation – a character founded on a historical figure who has persisted as written trace – and this entails "a special kind of conditional mode: the hypothetical *counter*factual […] the meaning of the *fabula* is interdiegetic, contained in the contrast between what happens in the diegesis and what the reader knows to be uncontroversial facts" (Gallagher 2011: 321-322, original emphasis). To varying degrees, the representations of Eliot in the three texts under study betray alterations from the original model. With Mead, they could result from the empathic bond between the novelist and the author, from the emotional and affective involvement which saturates this bibliomemoir. With O'Shaughnessy, the counterfactual is limited by the sheer extent of the cited primary sources, yet it transpires through the many extrapolated dialogues between Eliot, reconstructed as fictionalised character, and her female friends. With Duncker, the level of the counterfactual is at its highest, and it is vindicated by the narrator who begs to differ with Eliot on the opposition between realism and falsism. Some invention grafted onto facts may not amount to a distortion of truth, after all (see Duncker 2016: 29-30).

The three works under scrutiny bring Eliot closer to the reader, by favouring the private side of the Victorian author, even if this may not be so blatant in *Sophie and the Sibyl*. What is achieved is the shift from the formidable Lady to the confidante. Eliot becomes an ideal, model interlocutress for an emotionally involved reader. In a way, reading is like occupying Edith Simcox's role towards Eliot: "She's like a twentieth-century ghost in the wrong century" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 246). Time is reversible, and the contemporary reader ghosts the intimate exchanges between Eliot and her friends, for example with Barbara Bodichon on motherhood. Such a personal topic rebounds on artistic creation, however, for Eliot in 1869 recorded that she "profoundly rejoiced that I never brought a child into the world" (Eliot qtd. in Beer 2019: 191), while nonetheless "conscious of having an unused stock of motherly tenderness" (Beer 2019: 191). The motherly tenderness was the milk of human sympathy in her fiction writing. It is Mead,

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however, who goes the furthest in appropriating Eliot to cater for her personal needs, by positioning herself as the analysand undergoing a therapeutic cure with the Victorian writer in the capacity of analyst: "In a pretherapeutic age, she instinctively initiated the kind of conversation that went below the surface of things" (Mead 2014: 243).

5. Conclusion: The Sibyl's Elusive Reality but Multifaceted Truths

Notwithstanding their differences, the three texts studied do not address George Eliot primarily as a scholarly novelist but yield to the fascination of her partly occluded self. In a recently published book, Charlotte Jones returns to the question of the interrelationships between "reality" and "truth", two elusive concepts, which are nevertheless crucial when returning to a canonical figure of the literary heritage (Jones 2021: xiii-xiv). The famous scene of the pier glass in *Middlemarch* conveys a form of anxiety; the fact that reality through its multidirectional scratches going everywhere impartially – still unmediated, unprocessed and inchoate – might challenge the very possibility of representation. There seems to be in the three works analysed the temptation to restore this initial situation when the subject is not yet fashioned into concentric rings. This means that somehow Mead, Duncker and O'Shaughnessy purport to recreate this moment when all the pieces have to be assembled together from scratch. From the raw material of Eliot's many autographic sources, literary works, and Eliot criticism, they hold their candle towards their elusive and tantalising subject. The three contemporary writers' optical selections result more in a kaleidoscope of impressions than in a mutually harmonised whole. Yet this multifaceted approach, filtered through different prisms, is not necessarily a falsification of the truth. At least it allows for the possibility of plural truths for the shape-shifting identity of the Sibyl, which is still being reconfigured at the beginning of the twenty-first century – a proof of its lasting vitality. It also suggests that invention may have oblique, underlying or circuitous networks of connection with truth(s) concerning a canonical writer who was in some way a "master of pretence" (Duncker 2016: 30).

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Notes

1. A faction is a blending of fact and fiction (as the word itself). It highlights the thin and often porous borderline between facts and fiction, which postmodernism repeatedly foregrounds.
2. The road blends time and space by retrospectively treating life as an itinerary. Furthermore, intertextually the motif of the road resonates with the *Bildungsroman*, the structure of which undergirds many Victorian novels. Bakhtin theorised this time-space conflation through the chronotope: "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indications are fused into a carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope." (Bakhtin 1996: 84).
3. Previous fictions largely inspired by George Eliot's life include J. E. Buckrose's *Silhouette of Mary Ann* (1931); Elfrida Vipont's *Towards a High Attic: The Early Life of George Eliot* (1970), which purports to be a psycho-history of trauma with Eliot's brother Isaac as the initial tormentor; and F. W. Kenyon, *The Consuming Flame: George Eliot* (1970). In each case, the novelist's life affords raw material for fiction writing.
4. There are, of course, many references to the campus novel in neo-Victorian fictions. Often, in two-tier diegetic narratives, a contemporary academic is shown perusing a Victorian text or manuscript. This is the case with Bill Unwin in Graham Swift's *Ever After* (1992), Roland Michell in A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) or, more recently, with Sallie Declan who studies Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) in A. N. Wilson's *A Jealous Ghost* (2005).
5. Quite understandably, the term 'sibyl' has been accorded a lot of attention over the years. David Carroll notes that "[i]n an age of uncertainty and doubt there was a strong desire to hear the words of the sage […]. George Eliot was a special case, someone who had translated Strauss and Feuerbach, someone who had confronted the forces of unbelief and yet who, despite losing her own Christian faith, reasserted in no uncertain terms firm moral truths" (Carroll 1983: 12). He also adds "Is there any justification for seeing George Eliot as a sibyl of Mercia – I borrow the phrase from a contemporaneous review – the wise woman of the ancient Midland kingdom delivering her truths and prophecies to a world which has gone astray?" (Carroll 1983: 11). Gillian Beer comes up with a feminist gloss on the term: "She was a 'sibyl': woman as prophet, amazingly learned, exceptional, peripheral, powerful but inactive. […]

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She could become genius or freak rather than a representative of the capacities of other, equal, less-well-known women. Her sequestration made her assimilable back into society as it stood, not bringing about general change but voicing vatic insights which enforced no action" (Beer 2019: 26).

6. In Patricia Duncker's *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), Paul Michel is not the fictitious stand-in for Michel Foucault but a very handsome fiction writer and gay activist whose work is influenced by Michel Foucault, his "Oedipal ogre" (Duncker 1996: 15). The triangular pattern of narrator/Paul Michel/Michel Foucault is interesting because it is replicated *mutatis mutandis* through the narrator/writer/sibyl triangle in *Sophie and the Sibyl*.
7. According to Dorrit Cohn, the three signposts of fictionality are 1) "the synchronic bi-level (story/discourse) model, which cannot claim equally encompassing validity for texts positing their correspondence to events that have occurred prior to their narrative embodiment"; 2) "the dependence of certain prominent narrative modes (notably for the presentation of consciousness) on the constitutional freedom of fiction from referential constraints"; and 3) "the doubling of the narrative instance into author and narrator" (Cohn 1990: 800).
8. According to Richard Saint-Gelais, transfictionality, unlike Gérard Genette's hypertextuality (a relation of imitation and transformation between two texts), is predicated on interdiegetic migration. For example, one character travels from one fiction to other fictions. Sherlock Holmes is, of course, paradigmatic of this process, which Jasper Fforde has used abundantly. In *The Eyre Affair* (2001), for example, the titular Jane Eyre finds herself in a plot involving Mrs Gamp, Mr Pecksniff and Martin Chuzzlewit (see Saint-Gelais 2011: 231-237).
9. The porosity between accounting for one's own life and drawing from the biography of famous authors through hybridised narratives has complexified what was known simply as biography before, as Max Saunders shows: "The study of life-writing has generated further neologisms to indicate the new critical emphases […]. First, *auto/biography.* This compresses two key aspects, acting as shorthand for 'autobiography and/or biography' (useful when generalizing about words of both types) and also a term for individual works that fuse together autobiography and biography" (Saunders 2012: 6, original emphasis).
10. The exact lines from *The Winter's Tale* (1623) are "LEONTES: The fixure of her eye has motion in't,/ As we are mocked with art." and "What fine chisel/ Could ever yet cut breath?" (Shakespeare 2010: 244, Act V, sc. 3, ll. 67-68 and 245, Act V, sc. 3, ll. 78-79).

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11. The word 'sign' is especially meaningful for George Eliot who may be regarded as a semiotician. When the character of Tertius Lydgate, the Middlemarch doctor based upon Clifford Allbutt (see Ashton 1996: 304-305), is introduced, the narrator states that he was first "virtually unknown – known merely as *a cluster of signs* for his neighbours' false suppositions" (Eliot qtd. in O'Shaughnessy 2019: 176, added emphasis by O'Shaughnessy). O'Shaughnessy then glosses Eliot's choice of words: "She had said what she wanted to say. People were usually guided by a 'cluster of signs' – picking out what they wanted to pick out, to fit their own 'suppositions'" (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 177). In fact, in her biofiction, O'Shaughnessy extends what Eliot's narrator writes about Tertius Lydgate to Eliot. Indeed, she means that her biofictional Eliot is perceived through the prism of ingrained mentalities and ideological filters. In the three works under study, Eliot is both "a cluster of signs" open to textual exegesis and mediated by clusters of "suppositions" from pre-existing frames of reception.

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