

**WRITING THE AUTHOR: SYLVIA PLATH,
HENRY JAMES, VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE
BIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the effect produced when contemporary novelists write about fellow authors. Since the mid-1990s, the biographical novel, which fictionalises the lives of real-life historical authors, has become an increasingly popular literary genre in Britain and the United States. This contemporary exploration of authorial subjectivity, viewed here through the lens of life-writing, provides a reengagement with debates surrounding the crisis of the author-figure (exemplified by Roland Barthes), and the unreliability of biography as a discourse of subjectivity at the turn of the twenty-first century. Through its inherent self-reflexivity (with its exposure of both the author-biographer alongside the author-subject), I consider how the biographical novel succeeds in reconciling the author-figure with the literary text in new ways.

While critical interest in the biographical novel has tended to focus on a limited number of texts, little attention has been paid to their status as an emergent sub-genre of life-writing. Through the exemplary figures of Sylvia Plath, Henry James and Virginia Woolf and their corresponding biographical novels, I draw together a core body of texts to demonstrate their unity as a literary form. With an emphasis upon the role of life-writing in the construction of authorial subjectivity, I consider how each of the three author-subjects have cultivated — and been cultivated by — particular recurrent motifs: firstly through their own texts (whether fictional or biographical), then as they become manifest once again in the writing of the contemporary biographical novelists.

Modernist developments in biographical modes, particularly Woolf's revision of the relationship between the biographer and his or her subject, provide both context for the biographical novel, and a rich framework upon which to build contemporary forms of life-writing and authorial subjectivity. Taking these as a starting point through which to view the 'author question', my thesis reveals how the genre of the biographical novel offers a redefinition of both the author as a multiple, progressive and changing figure, and a highlighting how the reinterpretation of life-writing in fictional form both enhances and supports the future of biography and autobiography as an equally evolutionary form.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis examines the effect produced when novelists write about fellow authors. Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of novels have been published, predominantly in Britain and North America, in which the lives of real-life authors have become the subjects of fictional interpretation. I refer to such texts throughout this thesis as 'biographical novels', a term which I believe accurately reflects the balance of biographical emphasis and fictional embellishment that they convey.¹ The novelist and critic David Lodge (himself the author of two novels on the lives of Henry James and H. G. Wells respectively) first utilises the term 'biographical novel',² when he acknowledges this emergent literary genre:

the biographical novel — the novel which takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography — has become a very fashionable form of literary fiction in the last decade or so, especially as applied to the lives of writers.³

When referring to the popularity of the biographical novel, Lodge also highlights many of the assumed binary oppositions that, drawn together, comprise the qualities of the literary form. The term 'biographical' evokes traditional perceptions of 'real', 'history', 'objective, evidence-based' on the one hand, while the idea of 'novel' conjures a sense of the 'imaginative', 'exploration', and 'subjectivity' respectively. The

¹ As my research focuses on a comparatively small number of biographical novels and a specific group of author-subjects, it is not able to reflect the volume of such texts produced during this period. A more comprehensive list of more notable examples is incorporated into the bibliography.

² Lodge's novel on Henry James, *Author, Author*, is given further critical attention in Chapter 3 of this thesis; however I do not discuss his later novel on H. G. Wells, *A Man of Parts* (2011) as part of my study.

³ David Lodge, 'The Year of Henry James: or, Timing Is All: the story of a novel' in *The Year of Henry James or, Timing is All: the Story of a Novel* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006), pp. 03-103 (p.8). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

literary theorist Linda Hutcheon identifies the postmodern trend of 'historiographic metafiction' in *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), in which she argues that the narration of history can no longer be considered as 'objective', but exists as a subjective form of storytelling.⁴ The popularity of the biographical novel, with its combination of biographical detail and fictional license, is testament to the belief that biography can now be considered in the same terms that history is perceived by Hutcheon: as an imaginative construct. However, my thesis is not primarily concerned with the technique of blending biography with fiction, but more specifically with the practice and product of writing about other writers, and about the experience of writing. The biographical novel as it figures in this thesis is distinctive in its focus on real-life authors as its subjects. In the six novels that I will explore, the lives of Sylvia Plath, Henry James and Virginia Woolf each become the focus of biographical and fictional treatment.⁵ They are biographical in the sense that their novelists observe known facts about their subjects' lives and the respective narratives are kept within the realm of credibility, yet remain partly fictional because each novelist uses creative license in order to embellish upon what is already known about the lives of their biographical subjects.

The form of the biographical novel suggests an acceptance of the blurred boundaries between fiction and biography, reflecting biography's status as it is perceived at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, developments in postmodernist and poststructuralist theory contributed much to debates surrounding both the role of the author as well as the

⁴ Hutcheon's ideas are outlined in her seminal work, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* ([1988] London: Routledge, 2005).

⁵ In this thesis I offer a close reading of Emma Tennant's *Ted and Sylvia* (2001), Kate Moses's *Wintering* (2003), Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004), David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004), Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) and Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008).

reliability of biography as a literary form. The appearance and growing popularity of the biographical novel, and its interest in both the figure of the author and his or her biographical life, indicate a sustained engagement with these two interrelated and complimentary discourses.

I have selected the three literary figures Sylvia Plath, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf, and their respective biographical novels, for several reasons. Firstly: each of these three writers has been the focus of intense biographical (and critical) posthumous interest, and the multiple biographical novels that have been produced on each of these subjects are testament to this fascination with their lives and writings. The circumstances surrounding the deaths of Plath and Woolf by suicide have in part shaped numerous biographical portraits, to which I refer in greater detail in their corresponding chapters. James has also received significant biographical interest since his own death, with more recent focus of speculation placed upon the question of his sexual orientation. Another distinct attribute that unifies these three literary figures is the extent to which they have all written themselves or their literary professions into their own writing, whether through published prose, poetry, essays or in private diaries and letters. James wrote repeatedly about the literary life and the figure of the author throughout his career, most prolifically in his short stories of the 1890s and 1900s. Woolf also repeatedly (and most prolifically of the three authors) represented literary figures in her writing, a motif that once again permits the author to control the author-subject as a character in fiction, resulting in the opposing textual effects of revelation and concealment. Plath also represented the writing experience through her poetry, and it is this, as well as the multiple biographical novels that have been published on her life, that make her a subject of interest for my thesis. The complexity of the subjects' own literary self-representation is a trait that, as I argue

throughout this thesis, impacts upon and influences the representation of these subjects in the respective biographical novels. I use the writers' complex and often contradictory self-representation as a way of situating their contemporary representations in my chosen biographical novels.

While the appearance of all biographical novels can in part be attributed to a continued compulsion to know about the lives of these individual literary subjects, the shared interest in literary lives is inspired more specifically by equal curiosity in the written work, and the process behind its creation. Literary biography has long been a popular literary form, and one that continues in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Michael Benton offers an explanation for this trend:

Literary biography is unique [...] in that its subjects offer the prospect of access, however limited or illusory it may turn out to be, to the workings of the creative imagination. This prospect of gaining some insight into the mysteries of the artistic process is a seductive invitation to readers, one greatly enhanced by the intimacy between the biographer's and the subject's shared medium of words, their common interest in the literary forms, and the particular closeness of fictional and historical narrative.⁶

As Benton's summary suggests, the objective of literary biography — namely to access and comprehend the interior experience of creativity — remains singularly inaccessible to biographers. Benton remarks upon the 'prospect of access', rather than any objective insight into the 'workings of the creative imagination.' Such visions are nothing more than 'illusory', because it is not possible to know or understand another person's thoughts or experiences when producing a particular piece of work. It is a very human desire to understand another writer's experience that drives biographers on, yet its primary motivation remains its own impasse. The

⁶ Michael Benton, *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), p. 2.

speculative nature of the experience of the writing subject remains outside of the reach of conventional biographers, and may only exist within the realms of fiction. It is therefore left to the imaginative writer to perpetuate this experience of literary creativity by producing their own impression of the creative process. Benton also stresses the 'biographer's and the subject's shared medium of words' as well as their 'common interest in literary forms': this commonality should naturally lead to a literary form that not only showcases both author figures (the author-biographer and his or her author-subject), but also in which the self-reflexivity of writing about writing is explicitly investigated.

The status and reliability of biography as objective 'truth' have already been called into question, and its inherent problems made the subject of fiction in the last two decades of the twentieth century.⁷ In Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), the postmodern lack of faith in the empirical biographical portrait is explored with comic effect when the fictional biographer Geoffrey Braithwaite goes in pursuit of the 'real' parrot purported to belong to Gustave Flaubert: during his search, he encounters several parrots that claim to be the 'real' one. *The Paper Men* (1984) by William Golding dramatises the threat of the biographer's intrusion into a subject's privacy. The fictional writer Wilfred Barclay is the literary subject whose personal and private papers become the object of desire for his would-be biographer Rick Tucker. In his novel, Golding questions the ethics of writing the biographies of those who wish for their private lives to remain outside of public view — an issue that I consider in greater detail in Chapter 3 in relation to Henry James. A. S. Byatt's novel

⁷ See *The Troubled Face of Biography*, ed. by Eric Homberger and John Charmley (London: Macmillan, 1988); *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. by John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Michael Benton, *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), and Richard Bradford, *Life Writing: Essays on Autobiography, Biography and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) for further discussions of some of the central issues affecting life-writing at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

Possession: A Romance (1990) continues the theme begun in *The Paper Men*, in which the novelist emphasises the lengths to which biographers might potentially go, and the intimacy with which biographers feel they might 'know' their subject. Byatt's novel satirises the quest to know the biographical subject, which develops into an obsession for her two fictional biographers Roland Mitchell and Dr. Maud Bailey. The lives of their (also fictional) biographical subjects are transposed onto their own, as they perpetuate the love story involving their subjects, the poets Randolph Henry Ash and his lover Christabel LaMotte. However, these examples are not the first in which the problems of biography are explored through fiction, as both James and Woolf had produced their own such works of fiction almost a century earlier. In his novella 'The Aspern Papers' (1888), James staunchly defends what he perceives as the biographer's invasion of a writer's privacy, as he follows the unnamed 'publishing scoundrel' and his aggressive attempts to gain access to private papers written by the fictional poet Jeffrey Aspern. While Woolf wrote repeatedly on the subject of biography throughout her career, she explores both the limitations and the possibilities of the biographer in her fantasy biography *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). Woolf's eponymous subject lives through several centuries, changing gender mid-way through the narrative, thereby highlighting the transience and plurality of the biographical subject (albeit through exaggeration). Plath joins James and Woolf in her own explorations of the writing subject through fictional modes, with her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). Published only weeks before she took her own life, Plath conveys her depression and consequent suicide attempt as a teenager growing up in Massachusetts in the 1940s.

More recently, biographers have tried to address and overcome the problems of writing biography by drawing direct attention to the form and its fallibility. We see

established novelists such as Peter Ackroyd and Jonathan Coe following in the footsteps of exemplars like Woolf, by becoming biographers who each directly confront the problems and experiences of the biographer in their respective metabiographies *Dickens* (1990) and *Like A Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson* (2004). In *Dickens*, Ackroyd interweaves imagined dialogue between himself as the biographer and his biographical subject with documentary accounts of Dickens's life. It blends both diligently researched documentary biography with fictional embellishment in the form of the invented conversational interludes, and develops a form which hybridises conventional biography and other purely fictional accounts of real-life authors also written by Ackroyd. Examples of such novels include *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1982), *Chatterton* (1987), *Milton in America* (1996) and *The Lambs of London* (2004), all of which place Oscar Wilde, Thomas Chatterton, John Milton and Charles and Mary Lamb in fictionalised historical situations and settings, and it is the fantastical element that sets Ackroyd's novels apart from those that I study in my thesis. I do not define these as biographical novels because of their lack of grounding in biographical accuracy and credible detail. Coe pushes the boundaries of conventional biography in the way that he draws attention to his own role as a creator in order to highlight Johnson's own life as an author. It is an openly subjective account of a writer's life, recounted by adopting the same experimental approach to the novelistic form that his subject utilised in his own fiction. Coe's biography becomes, by implication, a form of autobiography; drawing upon his experience as an author to write about another, and appearing as an intrusive biographer in his account of Johnson's life. The appearance of these metabiographies and fictional portraits of authors indicates an acceptance of the fallibility of the biographical form, with a continued desire to access the life and mind of the writing

subject. That both literary forms are undertaken by established novelists is significant in itself, a detail that signals both an interest in the lives and experiences of fellow novelists, as well as the need to move towards more flexible forms through which to fulfil the demands of contemporary literary biography. It is between the two forms of fiction and documentary that the biographical novel carves a space for itself, encapsulating the practice of writing about writing. The fact that so many established novelists have chosen to write about authorship (particularly through fictional accounts of the lives of real-life authors) can be read as a defence of their own profession. Since Roland Barthes questioned the role of the author in the reading of his or her text (a development to which I return later in this introduction), the biographical novel can be seen as both an act of self-preservation for contemporary authors, as well as an homage to significant literary predecessors.

While the preceding examples capitalise specifically — and explicitly — on issues surrounding the writing of biography, the contemporary biographical novel takes as its focus the author as the writing subject. In doing so, it also implicates the contemporary novelist through his or her literary creativity and through a shared experience of authorship. The popularity of the biographical novel indicates a shift from an interest in biography more generally, to a focus on the figure of the author and the experience of writing, and the self-reflexivity that this attention naturally generates. A doubling of author figures is therefore implied in the biographical novel: that of the author-biographer and the author-subject. Through intertextual references to the subject's writing and appropriations of his or her work within a semi-autobiographical narrative, connections are established between the author-subject's life and his or her writing. This is not to say that the biographical novel intends to provide empirical narratives depicting its subject's thoughts and feelings during his or

her lifetime, but instead that it offers a creative response which contributes to an ongoing consideration of the experience of literary creativity.

While Henry James and Virginia Woolf fit neatly together as examples of early modernist writers, I include Sylvia Plath in my discussion to illustrate how the issues of life-writing raised by her precursors remain applicable to other author-figures of the twentieth century: I adopt a mode of analysis that can also potentially be applied to other literary examples not covered in this thesis. My decision to structure the thesis and each of its three component chapters in a non-chronological order is intended to illustrate the reach of the modernist legacy (which I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter). I wish to assert that such modernist legacies affect not only modernist writers, but that such reading strategies may be adopted in order to articulate universal experiences of authorship and authorial identity.

I perceive the formations of Plath and the extensive debates surrounding her life, discussed in Chapter 2 as direct responses to the anxieties surrounding biography's inability to convey objective 'truth', and situating Plath's as the first of my three case studies is intended to set out the key issues affecting the writing of literary biography. I wish to illustrate the relevance of these discussions surrounding life-writing and authorship not only to literary figures practicing at the turn of the twentieth century (James and Woolf), but also to more contemporary literary examples. The lives of James and Woolf overlap significantly, although those of Woolf and Plath only cross over for a handful of years (Plath would have been nine years old when Woolf died in March 1941).⁸ My reading of the novels on Virginia

⁸ James and Woolf met on a number of occasions as a consequence of James's friendship with Woolf's father Leslie Stephen: one of these encounters is described in further detail in Chapter 3.

Woolf appears in the fourth chapter, but her status as a pioneer of twentieth-century life-writing threads throughout the thesis, a link that gathers momentum through my studies of Plath and James, and acts as both a unifying and anchoring element of this study.

The biographical novel — particularly the six examples that I offer close readings of throughout this thesis — take a short period in the life of their real-life subject as the focus of their semi-fictional/semi-biographical narrative, rather than attempt to encompass each of the lives both chronologically and comprehensively. Each of these novels concentrates not on plot or outward action, but on the interior experience of the writer, and it is the literary life and a specific concern with authorial identity that emerges as their central focus. In *Ted and Sylvia* (2001), the professional rivalry between Plath and her husband Ted Hughes provides the context for Emma Tennant's portrait of Plath. In contrast, Kate Moses's Plath in *Wintering* (2003) is viewed specifically within the period during which she composed her collection of poems published as *Ariel* (1965), as an independent literary figure. The final five years of the nineteenth century provide the temporal span of Colm Tóibín's novel *The Master* (2004). This novel focusses on the years following Henry James's unsuccessful attempt to transform from novelist to playwright, and preceding his most successful 'major phase' as a novelist at the beginning of the twentieth century. Tóibín presents this period as important in the formation of James as a writer. Although *The Master* and *Author, Author* overlap chronologically, David Lodge's concern, expressed in the latter novel, is with James's failures in the theatre towards the end of the nineteenth century. In Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), the initial period of composition for Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) provides the narrative focus and temporal point of his portrait of Virginia Woolf. The theme of

professional rivalry reappears in Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008), presenting her version of Woolf in relation to Woolf's sister, the artist Vanessa Bell.

In the case of Sylvia Plath, Emma Tennant draws on the mythological tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (n.d.), appropriated by Ted Hughes in *Tales from Ovid* (1997) and then again by Tennant as a way of framing her story of the relationship between Plath and Hughes in *Ted and Sylvia*. For Moses, both the structure and themes of Plath's poetry collection *Ariel* provide the inspiration for the structure and subject matter for the retelling of Plath's life in *Wintering*. In the novels on James, neither Tóibín nor Lodge utilise any specific work of fiction as a structuring device for their narratives on James's life. Michael Cunningham transposes the narrative structure of *Mrs Dalloway* onto *The Hours* when telling the story of a single day in the life of his literary subject. Finally, in Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia*, we see a response to both Woolf's autobiographical writing and Vanessa Bell's painting as the novelist's technique for creating her portrait of Woolf and Bell.

In Chapter 2; 'Writing Sylvia, Sylvia Writing: The Voices of Plath in *Ted and Sylvia* and *Wintering*', I demonstrate how Plath's active participation in the construction of multiple 'Plaths' eradicates the idea of a 'real' Sylvia Plath as relayed through her writing. The focus of Chapter 3, 'The Spoils of Henry James: Figuring the Author in the House in *The Master and Author, Author*' is Henry James's seemingly unwitting and contradictory complicity in his own self-promotion. Seen through a poststructuralist stance on the Freudian concept of 'the uncanny', the motif of the house is perpetuated through the biographical novels by Tóibín and Lodge and their respective formations of James as their semi-biographical subject. The case of Virginia Woolf in Chapter 4, 'Woolfian Portraits: Writing, Painting, and the Visual Image of the Author in *The Hours* and *Vanessa and Virginia*', illustrates how she

capitalises on this game of revelation and concealment through writing, a strategy that prepares the ground for her multiple literary representations.

Some biographical novels have received moderate critical attention as individual works, with a small number of notable exceptions.⁹ As a cluster of novels, however, they have been the subject of modest critical attention, though have only recently begun to be viewed as an emerging sub-genre of life-writing by a number of literary critics: to date, little critical material exists on the biographical novel as a sub-genre of life-writing.¹⁰ The fact that so many labels currently exist for the same group of novels also illustrates how little unity has been generated as a result of these sparse critical studies.¹¹

Laura E. Savu currently provides the only book-length study of what she describes as 'author fictions' in *Postmortem Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author* (2009).¹² However, her definition of the 'author fictions' she discusses differs from what I believe constitutes the 'biographical novel': her corpus incorporates narratives on purely fictional authors, as well as examples that have little grounding in biographical detail (such as those by Ackroyd to which I have already referred). In her study, Savu explores what these 'author fictions' reveal and assert about the

⁹ Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* attracted considerable media and critical attention after winning the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, which increased further with the release of Stephen Daldry's 2002 film adaptation of the novel. The coincidental publication of the two Henry James novels *The Master* and *Author*; *Author* caused a flurry of mostly media attention, leading to such articles as Michiel Heyns's 'The Curse of Henry James', *Prospect*, 26 October 2004, pp. 66-69, and Lodge's own essay 'A Year of Henry James: or, Timing Is All: the story of a novel'.

¹⁰ Of the few studies to recognise these novels as a growing trend, Michael Lackey explains in a sweeping observation merely that 'developments in postmodernism made it possible to fuse biography and the novel' in *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 3.

¹¹ Both Lodge and Lackey adopt the term 'biographical novel' (Lodge, 'A Year of Henry James', p. 8, Lackey, p. 2). Ann-Marie Priest chooses the term 'bio-fiction' in her essay 'The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author' in *Life Writing*, 4:2 (2007), 303-305 (p. 305), while Laura E. Savu selects 'author fictions' to describe the same group of novels in her study (see note below).

¹² Laura E. Savu, *Postmortem Postmodernists: The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative* (Madison Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), p. 9.

postmodern condition, but while my research draws on some postmodern and poststructuralist theory, my study of the biographical novel pivots more specifically on the self-reflexivity of the writing subject as well as that of the biographical novelist. This self-reflexivity provides a focus and point of departure for my study, not simply revealing how the author-subjects are 'postmodernised' by the contemporary novelists, but equally that the author-subjects ultimately set the boundaries for considering authorial subjectivity.¹³ I also consider my research as distinct from Savu's in my emphasis upon the practice of *life-writing*. Representations of author-subjects underpin the writing of the contemporary novelists as my individual studies of the three authors Plath, James and Woolf exemplify, which assert the existence of the author not simply as a fictional character, but as a reflection of a real life.

David Lodge and the academic Ann-Marie Priest both recognise the growth of these biographical novels as a body of works, as well as the significance of their appearance. These points are considered in their respective essays 'A Year of Henry James or, Timing Is All: the story of a novel' (2006), and 'The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author' (2007).¹⁴ Both Lodge and Priest approach the subject of the biographical novel from differing perspectives — one as a novelist, the other as a critic — and, as a consequence of which, produce differing explanations for the emergence of the biographical novel.

Lodge's comments appear in an essay devoted predominantly to the Henry James phenomenon, in which he describes the composition and reception of his own

¹³ Savu, p. 10.

¹⁴ See David Lodge, 'A Year of Henry James: or, Timing Is All: the story of a novel' and Ann-Marie Priest, 'The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author' in *Life Writing*, 4:2 (2007), 303-305. Further references to Priest are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

biographical novel *Author, Author*. Whilst musing upon his own experiences, he briefly diverts his attention to the wider question of the biographical novel and its emergence in recent years. While he notes that: 'The biographical novel makes no attempt to disguise its hybrid nature,' it is from the perspective of a novelist that he approaches the subject and subsequent explanation for its popularity (p. 9). He explains: 'In short, the biographical-novel-about-a-writer has recently acquired a new status and prominence as a subgenre of literary fiction' (p. 10). Although he acknowledges the hybridity of the literary form, the emphasis that Lodge places upon the biographical novel is on its status as fiction rather than as biography; his personal experience as a novelist (and particularly as the writer of *Author, Author*) naturally influences his point of view on the subject. Lodge refers to the examples of Anthony Burgess and Peter Ackroyd, both of whom have a firmly-established tradition of writing novels about real-life authors transformed into fictional narratives;¹⁵ but what remains of particular interest to Lodge here is the sudden explosion of novelists, both new and experienced, who have recently decided to write biographical novels that combine biographical detail with fictional interpretation of the subject's life. He offers the following list of possible explanations for the popularity of what he terms 'the biographical novel':

Why the biographical novel should have recently attracted so many writers as a literary form is an interesting question, to which there are several possible answers. It could be taken as a symptom of a declining faith or loss of confidence in the power of purely fictional narrative [...] It could be regarded as a characteristic move of postmodernism — incorporating the art of the past in its own processes through reinterpretation and stylistic pastiche. It could be seen as a sign of decadence and exhaustion in contemporary writing,

¹⁵ Lodge lists Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964), *Abba, Abba* (1977) and *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1993) and Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *Chatterton*, *Milton in America* and *The Lambs of London* as examples of these novels.

or as a positive and ingenious way of coping with the 'anxiety' of influence. (p. 10)

Lodge employs a rather dense list of plausible explanations for the appearance of this cluster of novels, all of which address the state of fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Each of these possibilities is grounded in the body of writing produced by the novelist, but he stops short of suggesting that the biographical novel could in part be a way of addressing the question of subjectivity, or more specifically, authorial subjectivity.

It is as a reader and critic that Priest responds to the subject of the biographical novel. Her article's appearance in the journal *Life Writing* situates this discussion of the biographical novel firmly within the context and practice of representing a *biographical* life. In this article Priest both acknowledges and responds to Lodge's explanation for the popularity of what she refers to as 'bio-fictions' (but what I shall continue to call 'biographical novels') as a way of formulating her own thoughts on their popularity as a literary form (p. 303). The biographical novel is, for Priest, a readerly response: 'readers remain devoted to that lurking human form. To look for traces of the author in their work is a kind of reflex, one that dies hard even for sophisticated readers' (p. 303). The continued desire to identify the author, an ideological figure so strongly vilified during the twentieth century by the New Critics and later by post-structuralists, as Priest argues, is an inherently human reaction. She dismisses Lodge's explanation as both simplistic and reductive:

Lodge has suggested that writers are naturally interested in other writers who have faced the same professional challenges and problems. But this surely understates the case [...] Writers are readers, too; or, rather, they are readers first. And the relationship between

readers and writers they love is peculiarly charged: full of emotion, whether gratitude or fear (of influence, of exposure), and coloured by projection. (p. 304)

Priest presents a more complex response here to Lodge's own, which does more to interrogate simply the shared experience of writing. She refers to novelists as 'readers first', thereby highlighting a dual and symbiotic process that places the focus upon both the writer and his or her literary subject. She uses words like 'relationship' and 'projection' as suggestive means of viewing the biographical novel, encompassing both the process of composition and its reception. More significantly, Priest exposes the dual function of the author as both the producer and consumer of the text as they are figured within the biographical novel.

Like Lodge, Priest refers to what she regards as precursors to the biographical novel, but unlike Lodge's reference to the late-twentieth-century novelists and contemporaries Ackroyd and Burgess, Priest draws on the much earlier example of Virginia Woolf and her mock-biography *Orlando*. She asks the provocative question: 'One wonders what Woolf would have made of being turned into a fiction [...] Having made her own lover and fellow writer Vita Sackville-West into a fictional character in the genre-busting novel *Orlando*, she would surely have understood the impulse' (p. 304). By drawing attention to the example of Woolf and *Orlando*, Priest not only touches upon the practice of transforming real people into fictional characters, but also introduces the idea that the projection she refers to elsewhere in her article functions in both directions: the contemporary writer viewed through his or her literary subject, as well as the literary subject perceived in the context of their own writing.

Priest advances her argument by describing a novelist's decision to write about another writer as 'an act of love' (p. 304), using language suggestive of sexual

desire: 'For a reader who is also a writer, the best way to consummate the reader-writer relationship may be to enter into the beloved by writing a fiction of one's own' (p. 304). Highlighting feelings that move beyond love and admiration, these observations imply that the biographical novel provides a more positive response to the contemporary practice of novel writing than those suggested by Lodge. She regards the sensation of love as ripe for the creative process: 'there's nothing like it to set the imagination humming and spinning' (p. 304). Priest's perception of the biographical novel as a gesture of love towards a literary subject lies in contrast to those of nervousness and anxiety as expressed by Lodge. A final point made by Priest refers again to the relationship established between a writer and his or her subject, and to the question of life-writing. In reference to Priest's earlier idea about the process of projection, this gesture of love towards another can also be extended and turned back on the writing self in an act of narcissism: 'To turn one's favourite novelist into a character in a novel is in a sense to master [...] the master. It is also to run the risk of transmuting one's subject into a version of oneself' (p. 304-5). With this remark, Priest draws not only biography and fiction into the frame, but also the process of autobiography. Although the most explicit subject implied by the biographical novel is the historical author, the process of writing *as* an author *about another* author inherently involves a heightened level of self-reflexivity. The practice of writing about another real-life author indicates an exchange between writing about the self and writing about another: it therefore involves a shift between autobiography, biography and fiction. Although one should not disregard the significance of an author's personal and professional experience in the production of the biographical novel, perhaps the extent to which it involves an amount of introspection on the part of the author is not fully acknowledged. The more complex

triangulation made evident by Priest between the authorial subject, the authorial self and the process of literary creativity is one that I shall carry forward in my reading of the biographical novels that follow.

It is significant that two of the earliest critical acknowledgments of the biographical novel are written by individuals from different literary practices: these differences serve to highlight the hybridity of this literary form. Placed side by side, the responses by Lodge and Priest on the subject of the biographical novel underline the gaps existent between their interpretations; that these accounts are offered by a writer and a critic respectively serves as an embodiment and exposure of the various facets of reading, writing and creativity that comprise the biographical novel: the author-subject becomes the unifying focus of their approaches. While Lodge foregrounds the status of contemporary fiction, Priest draws upon the creative process and literary subjectivity as reasons for the popularity of the biographical novel. Both readings, however, point towards the presence of the doubled author in the process and as a product of the biographical novel, but it is Priest who emphasises the author's doubled role as a reader, as well as the notion of writing the self and other. What is commonly exposed in these approaches is the doubled author (embodied by the biographer who is implicit in the narrative and his or her subject who is explicitly portrayed in it) and the doubled reader (the biographer who is the reader of the subject's writing, as well as the reader of the biographical novel). The biographical novel involves a movement between the simultaneous practices of reading and writing, creating a literary form that combines biography, autobiography and fiction in a unified work.

Developments in poststructuralist theory in the latter half of the twentieth century have also had a profound effect upon perceptions of the writing author,

highlighting the role of the reader in the interpretation of a text, as Priest outlines. Poststructuralist approaches to the status and function of the author gained prominence in the late 1960s, debates which were dominated by the theorists Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. In their respective polemics they assert that the idea of the author should remain separate to a reading of his or her writing. While Foucault put forward his impression of the author as an ideological construct in his essay 'What Is an Author?' (1969), formed over the last few centuries since the creation of copyright, Barthes insists most famously in 'The Death of the Author' (1967) on the simultaneous demotion of the 'Author-God' as the originator and origin of a text's meaning, and the resultant promotion of the reader as the source of a text's interpretation.¹⁶ In the same essay he asserts that writing — the act that defines an author *as* an author — is the very act that undermines his or her identity and authority in a piece of writing. He claims that 'Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' (p. 142). The written product of this activity, according to Barthes, signifies a temporal disparity between the author and his or her text: 'The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after' (p. 145). This separation of text and author poses few problems for the documentary biographer, but creates difficulties for literary biographers by restricting their ability to draw legitimate connections between the life and writing of a literary subject. By perpetuating the experience of writing as an activity (rather

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism*, ed. by Josué V. Harare, trans. by Josué V. Harare ([1969] Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 141-60, and Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. by Stephen Heath, trans. by Stephen Heath ([1967] Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1979) pp. 142-48 (p. 142). Further references to 'The Death of the Author' are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

than as a literary artefact), biographical novelists concede to Barthes's reduction of the 'Author' as the past of their own writing, whilst at the same time overcoming this issue by engaging with the creative process, as though to continue writing is also in some way to resist becoming the past of their work.

By returning and responding to their subjects' work, the biographical novelists also fulfil the role that Barthes hails as the 'birth of the reader'. As I have already observed, Ann-Marie Priest explains how 'Writers are readers, too; or, rather, they are readers first.'¹⁷ It is through the biographical novel that the opportunity is created to adopt more explicit dual roles of 'writer' and 'reader' for the contemporary novelist, and it is the interrelation and effect of these two complimentary (yet at times opposing) roles that remain central to my reading of the biographical novel.

In 'The Death of the Author' Barthes concentrates on the destruction of the authorial voice, only briefly announcing the 'birth of the reader' at the close of his essay: 'we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (p. 148). He develops his theory of the reader's birth in a later essay, 'From Work to Text' (1971), in which he calls for the 'relativization of the relations of writer, reader and observer (critic)'.¹⁸ He also distinguishes between the conventional concept of the 'work' in opposition to his poststructuralist notion of the 'Text'; the 'work' is given meaning by a 'filiation' (p. 60) between the writing and its author, while the 'Text' is produced through an engagement between the writing and its reader:

¹⁷ Priest, p. 304.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text' in *Image - Music - Text*, ed. by Stephen Heath, trans. by Stephen Heath ([1971] Glasgow: Fontana Collins, 1979), pp. 155-164 (p. 156). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

The Text [...] decants the work [...] from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice. This means that the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice. (p. 162)

What characterises Barthes's definition of the 'Text' is the reader's pivotal role in the process of interpretation: the reader and the text are superior to the author in this respect. Put another way, it is the reader who produces the Text according to Roland Barthes, with the emphasis placed on the process, not the product.

It has already been established that each of the biographical novels utilises a subject's writing as the basis for retelling their biographical lives, whether achieved formally or thematically. In doing so, they challenge the poststructuralist claim that an author's life should not be read through the context of the work, or vice versa. The manner in which these novelists present their subjects' lives through the context of the work does not suggest that the two are drawn upon to explain each other, but that the two influences are nonetheless inextricably connected. The biographical novel involves a process of reading and reinterpreting both the life and the writing, and in doing so the contemporary novelists reveal the idea that both the physical and textual facets of an author's existence are, in a sense, a product of literary creativity.

Barthes later unifies his thoughts on the author, reader and text, by arguing that the reader becomes the creator of a different kind of author perceived through the text. In *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971),¹⁹ he declares that the 'Author-God' described in 'The Death of The Author' has been replaced with a 'paper author', itself an explicit product of the reading process:

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller. ([1971] Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

The pleasure of the Text also includes the amicable return of the author. Of course, the author who returns is not the one identified by our institutions [...] he is not even the biographical hero. The author who leaves his text and comes into our life has no unity; he is a mere plural of 'charms', the site of a few tenuous details, yet the source of vivid novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiability. (p. 8)

Barthes's process of reading the 'author' as perceived here is also involved in the process of construction, becoming another writer-figure as a result. Although Barthes's assertion about the death of the author initially sent the 'author' and 'reader' along two divergent paths, the ideas he expresses in his later essay reunite them through this exchange. He puts his theories into practice in his 'anti-autobiography', *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), written nearly a decade after 'The Death of the Author.' In this text he exploits the notion of the self as nothing more than a 'paper-I', declaring that: 'the subject is merely an effect of language.' He demands that the 'Roland Barthes' that he writes 'must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel — or rather by several characters.'²⁰ The biographical novel validates the author in his or her role as the 'author-as-reader', as Priest's analysis identifies. This doubled authorial role also creates a doubled effect within the text: that of the impression of the 'paper-Author', and of the 'author-creator' as a literary process.

In his book *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (1992), Seán Burke persuasively argues that Barthes in fact undermines his own theory of the author's textual death. Burke accuses Barthes of performing a self-destructive exercise: 'Roland Barthes in 'The Death of the Author' does not so much destroy the 'Author-God', but participates in its

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* ([1975] London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 79, 119.

construction. He must create a king worthy of the killing.²¹ This 'Author-God' that Barthes writes of in his later essays is, so Burke suggests, already an exaggerated figure manufactured by Barthes: 'What is happening in this procedure is that Barthes himself, in seeking to dethrone the author, is led to an apotheosis of authorship that vastly outpaces anything to be found in the critical history he takes arms against.'²² As a consequence, Barthes is guilty of creating exactly the ideological figure that he claims to discredit through his theoretical writings. He becomes trapped in a *mis en abyme* of his own creation; and it is such self-reflexivity that is characteristic of many of the biographical novels and the subjects on whose lives they are based. By challenging Barthes's definition of the 'Author', Burke can be credited with sparking a much wider trend for readdressing the author-question, and I believe that the contemporary biographical novels that I study in this thesis offer a response to this question. If we are indeed living and writing in a post-Barthesian world, in which the 'author' may only exist as a fictional construct whereby representations of authorship may be defined as either (or both) biographical or autobiographical, then the biographical novel remains the best literary form in which to allow such representations to flourish.

Changing approaches to literary biography in the earlier decades of the twentieth century have also impacted upon the perceived role of the author (or biographer) and the biographical subject. Such changes challenge Barthes's own distinction between the author as a 'plural of charms' and the 'biographical hero' that he identifies in his essays. As the academic Max Saunders argues, the relationship between the author and his or her subject of life-writing becomes complicated in

²¹ Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 2nd edn. ([1992] Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 26.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

some of the writing of the modernist period — a perspective that helps to situate the popularity of the biographical novel today. Saunders observes a tendency to adopt fictional forms for exploring biography and autobiography in modernist literature. In *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010),²³ he argues that, contrary to an assumed movement away from a concern with life-writing in literature of the modernist period, much of the writing from this era can be characterised by an engagement with both biography and autobiography in more experimental fictional forms. Saunders outlines the focus of *Self-Impression*: 'This study is primarily concerned with the ways in which these categories of autobiography, biography, fiction, and criticism begin to interact, combining and disrupting each other in new ways, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth' (p. 1). Through these observations Saunders seeks to redefine this writing from the modernist period in light of its engagement with fiction and the forms of life-writing.

Among the authors whose works he examines are James and Woolf; the former's autobiographical writings Saunders presents as examples of 'literary impressionism', while the latter he regards as providing one of 'the most sustained fictionalising engagement[s] with biography' in *Orlando* and her work on the 'New Biography' (p. 19, 21). Taking my cue from Saunders's revelatory rereading of this modernist writing, I wish to argue throughout this thesis not simply that authors of contemporary biographies perpetuate this pattern of biographical and autobiographical experimentation, but that the authorial subjectivity expressed through the writing of each of the chosen literary subjects provides inspiration for the

²³ Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction and the Forms of Modern Literature* ([2010] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

articulation of the biographical novelists' own authorial subjectivity. I am particularly interested in the nature of this self-reflexivity, and its progression through the examples of the three chosen literary subjects. My focus lies specifically with the representation of the author-figure in contemporary literature; however, Saunders does not maintain the same emphasis in his study, and I argue that the accent upon the author and the experience of literary creativity permits an exploration of the status and experience of both the textual author-subject and his or her biographical novelist. The effect of such literary practice is twofold; firstly, it provides an acknowledgement of the modernist predecessors, whose own experimentation with the forms of life-writing signalled the mergence of biographical and autobiographical portraits. Secondly; placed within the context of authorial subjectivity (as they are in the biographical novel), such assertions of the self and other challenge the poststructuralist insistence that the biographical life and written work should not be considered as inextricably connected. The implication of these representations is, therefore, that the writers of the contemporary biographical novels use the literature of their subjects as a starting point for thinking about their own authorial subjectivity. Furthermore, if — as Saunders convincingly argues — the literature of these subjects can be reread and redefined as a form of 'auto/biografiction' (p. 7), then the contemporary author's textual response is complicated by an inversion of authorial identity through the context of literary creativity; the textual form that follows in the biographical novel presents a specific and self-reflexive mode of life-writing. Leading on from this assertion, I also draw upon Saunders in *Self-Impression* when he: 'advances a [...] claim: that modern English literary history is shaped by its conflicting responses to life-writing — especially autobiography' (p. 10). However, I argue a slightly different point: that contemporary modes of writing about authorial

identity establish and maintain a conflicted stance towards autobiography and biography (as a way of legitimising the practice of writing about the self through the other); one that is embodied in the examples of the biographical novel that follow in the proceeding chapters of this thesis. Life-writing is therefore not an end product of these novels, or their defining and unifying genre, but the lens through which these elements of authorial subjectivity may be negotiated.

As Saunders is keen to stress, both Lytton Strachey's and Virginia Woolf's approaches to biography demonstrate a shift from biography as a conservative and restricted form to freer conceptions of a combined practice of biography and autobiography. He explains:

Where biography offered the Victorians the promise of a shared social judgement of an individual's life, the hope of objective knowledge and moral certainty, autobiography has become the quintessential postmodern genre (if it is a genre, which postmodernism cannot know) precisely because of its freedom from all these things. (p. 3)

If the generic distinctions that had previously been placed around biography, autobiography and fiction have already been obscured by these modernist writers, then the undertaking of authors of the biographical novel becomes a more self-conscious, self-reflexive quest that manages to further dismantle the idea of biography, autobiography and fiction and the possibility of their existence as mutually independent genres.

While Saunders identifies the modernist period as a moment that witnessed experimentation with fiction and life-writing, I would like to make a more specific claim that it is at this time that the role of the biographer was also being explored. He highlights key figures who were instrumental in the evolution of the forms of life-writing (including James as a protomodernist and Woolf as a leading modernist

author), and it is Virginia Woolf whose name remains central to this movement. Hermione Lee also remarks how 'Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries were poised on the edge of the revolution in life-writing which has turned biography into the intimate, iconoclastic, gossipy and popular art-form it is now.'²⁴ Although Lytton Strachey is usually considered alongside Woolf as a fellow pioneer of twentieth-century life-writing, it is Woolf in particular whose heightened self-reflexivity as a writer signals a pivotal moment in the progression of life-writing and the role of the biographer at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is not simply Woolf's self-referentiality that is significant here, but the way in which her literary presence engages with and responds to the biographical subject.

In the chapters that follow, I adopt a reading strategy that first considers the author-subject's own projection of the authorial self through fiction (and poetry in the case of Plath); my responses to the questions at the centre of my thesis stem from a reading of the author-figure that emerges when read through the writing of the author-subject. Put another way, my interest lies in what happens to the images of both the textual author-subject and their corresponding author-biographer as a result of this comparative approach. As Saunders's study illustrates, James and Woolf were writing at a time when theories of biography and autobiography were being interrogated, with life-writing being explored in fictional forms. The example of Woolf and her essay on 'The New Biography' attests that the concept of life-writing was beginning to change significantly. As my own study emphasises, each of the writers in this thesis, Plath, James and Woolf, are deeply self-conscious writers. It is the reflective action that each of these writers performs when producing their respective portraits of author-figures that remains central to my study, as well as the

²⁴ Hermione Lee, 'Biomythographers: Rewriting the lives of Virginia Woolf', *Essays in Criticism*, 46.2 (1996), 95-114 (p. 105).

way in which these portraits inform the authorial representations of the contemporary biographical novelists. I wish to show how the author-subjects determine not only their own posthumous image, but also how they are instrumental in determining those of their author-biographers. By beginning this thesis with a study of Plath, then James, and concluding with Woolf, I wish to chart the increasing self-reflexivity evident in each of my chosen author-subjects (and therefore their author-biographers). Implied self-reflexivity is identifiable in the case of Plath, but this gathers momentum in the case of James, and reaches its most overt expression in the case of Woolf.

Many scholars credit Strachey with helping to reinvent biography in the earlier twentieth century, incorporating a biographer's self-awareness alongside rejections of hagiographic and monumental portraits that came to embody the Victorian biography.²⁵ However, it is Woolf who engages more specifically — and more self-consciously and successfully — with the relationship between the biographer and their literary subject. Furthermore, her work on the 'New Biography' reflects the impact that this relationship has upon the product of literary biography. It is important to look back at the literary conventions that were being rejected in order to understand what was so 'new' about the 'New Biography' created by Woolf and Strachey. Much of Woolf's writing seeks to debunk beliefs held by her own father Leslie Stephen, himself a co-founder of *The Dictionary of National Biography* and one of its editors from its conception in 1885 (when his daughter Virginia would have been three years old) until 1891. He is widely considered to be an exemplar of 'the kind of Victorian 'official' biographic tradition that the *DNB* represented:

²⁵ See Max Saunders, *Self-Impression* and Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) for more sustained considerations of the 'New Biography'.

conventional, patriarchal, impersonal, censorious and censored'.²⁶ During his editorship of the *DNB*, Stephen authored a small number of entries for some of its more notable subjects, and published several biographies and essays on biography that outlined what he perceived to be the proper writing of biography in the late-Victorian era. If we consider the varying attitudes towards the role of the biographer and the corresponding representations of the subject as practiced by Stephen, Strachey and Woolf, it is possible to chart the progression and emergence of both the literary subject and the biographer at the turn of the twentieth century, and its consequent status as a precursor to the biographical novel being produced today.

Stephen wrote the essay 'Biography' (1893), in which he set out his own belief in the appropriate role of the biographer, as well as the proper representation of his or her biographical subject.²⁷ If we refer to his thoughts on the writing of biography, it is not only his belief in the existence of empirical 'truths' but the means through which he feels they should be conveyed, that characterises his approach to the relationship between biographer and subject. He adopts modern imagery of the time with which to sketch his impression, yet the intended effect is undeniably traditional within the context of Victorian life-writing:

A biographer has, of course, to lay down his framework, to settle all the dates and the skeleton of facts; but to breathe real life into it he must put us into direct communication with the man himself; not tell us simply where he was or what he was seen to do, but put him at one end of a literary telephone and the reader at the other. The author should, as often as possible, be merely the conducting wire.²⁸

²⁶ Saunders, pp. 438-39.

²⁷ Leslie Stephen, 'Biography' in *Men, Books and Mountains: Essays*, ed. by S. O. A. Ullman ([1893] London: Hogarth Press, 1956) pp. 128-44.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Through his use of the telephone analogy, biography becomes a means through which the reader is intended to hear the subject's words directly through a one-way 'exchange'. The biographer should remain a silent conduit; invisible, not human but mechanical. The reader should be, he implies, the recipient of certain assumed facts, and not an interpreter of the biographer's work. For Stephen, biography should provide a direct transaction through which the subject 'speaks' and the reader passively listens. For this analogy he selects a machine that symbolises human conversation, overlooking the possibility that the 'conducting wire' of the telephone could provide a two-way dialogue which remains incompatible with the 'direct communication' that he asserts in his essay. The image of the telephone wire is not successful as a metaphor for the direct transference of biographical subject to the reader.

In *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late Victorian Period* (1999), Trev Lynn Broughton explores the impact of Stephen's 'conducting wire' metaphor and the role of the 'biographer-as-wire' in 'Biography'.²⁹ Situating her study within the context of the then 'futuristic' (p. 49) telephone in the 1890s (when Stephen wrote this essay), Broughton highlights how the telephone wire had become central to political and technological debates of the time. The question of the telephone's ability to convey an 'authentic' voice, or only a capacity to mimic the voice of the speaker, had been the subject of these disputes. Broughton explains how Stephen's telephone wire 'did not actually produce a voice, but an artificial representation of a voice analogous to, but distinctly different from, the sounds uttered from the mouth' (p. 53). This definition implies that Stephen's

²⁹ Trev Lynn Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late Victorian Period* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 49. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

'direct' message from the biographical subject to the reader was not as direct as he asserts in his essay, or as capable of masking the presence of the biographer. He announces that 'no writer has been at a loss for a model' in James Boswell, author of the seminal *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), who produces 'the sudden thrill which comes to us when we find ourselves in direct communication with human feeling [...] when we perceive that a real voice is speaking out of "the dark backward and abysm" of the past' in his biography of Johnson.³⁰ Yet in drawing on Boswell's technique of 'direct communication' with Johnson, Stephen also unwittingly encourages the mimicry not only of the voice of his biographical subject, but also of his 'model' biographer Boswell.

Lytton Strachey sets out his manifesto for the 'new biography' in his preface to *Eminent Victorians* (1918), in which he wishes to distinguish his 'new biography' from the 'Standard Biographies' of his Victorian predecessors, to which he claims to be 'indebted'.³¹ It is also in this preface that he remarks how the biographical portraits are not his central concern; it is the medium of life-writing that he adopts as a means through which to expose what he perceives to be the failings of his predecessors. As he explains: 'I have attempted, through the medium of biography to present some Victorian visions to the modern eye.'³² As Strachey presents it, life-writing is not his goal but the medium through which he chooses to expose and therefore critique the conventions of the Victorian tradition, and it is Strachey's expression of feeling that indicates the prominence (or even dominance) of the biographer in his mode of life-writing. We see an emergent biographer in Strachey's interpretation, and the subject

³⁰ Stephen, p. 136.

³¹ Lytton Strachey. *Eminent Victorians: The Illustrated Edition* ([1918] London: Bloomsbury, 1988), p. 7.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

by comparison remains of secondary interest, as set out in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*. In this sense, we witness a reversal of the roles between Stephen's earlier impression of the biographer as passive, and his subject as the one who 'speaks'. Strachey outlines a fundamental change in the role of the biographer and what he sees as the biographer's role in the search for biographical 'truths':

He will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden searchlight into the obscure recesses, hitherto undivined. He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.³³

According to Strachey's description, it is not the subject but the biographer who achieves heroic status. In the process of debunking or demeaning his biographical subject, the biographer becomes the glorified figure; no longer the silent yet futuristic conduit described by Stephen, but now the focus of imaginative exploration of historical epic traditions. Strachey's exaggerated impressions see him initially likened to a soldier in combat; his subject the target of a planned attack. He then becomes an explorer, in search of details of his subject's life. Yet amongst these comedic analogies there also exists a suggestion of homoerotic intimacy between the biographer and his subject: he is to attack in 'unexpected places', 'fall upon the flank, or the rear', and probe into 'obscure recesses' in his quest to learn about his biographical subject. Strachey's biographer is more human (and indeed more sensual) than Stephen's telephone wire and, by contrast, becomes the centre of biography's attention.

³³ Strachey, p. 7.

When Woolf comes to outline her thoughts on the 'New Biography' in her essay of the same name, it is not to the work of Strachey that she turns for inspiration or affirmation. In 'The New Biography' (1927),³⁴ she looks to the figure of James Boswell and to her contemporary Harold Nicolson and his collection of biographical portraits, *Some People* (1926). At the start of the essay, she places the idea of 'personality' and its representation at the centre of her focus, displaying it as both the goal and the obstacle of biography, and through her negotiation of these issues she introduces the now iconic 'granite and rainbow' analogy upon which much of her life-writing is built:

And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (p. 229)

Woolf's primary interest, then, is exactly how to overcome the problem of channelling the 'intangibility' of a subject's personality, if this is incompatible with the characterless quality of 'truth'. She offers a possible strategy for successfully transmitting this impression of personality: 'For in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity' (p. 229). The role of the biographer resembles that of a novelist as described here by Woolf, with an emphasis upon the interpretation and appropriation of biographical facts. This raises the question of exactly how personality is conveyed, in addition to what effect is produced in the text as a result.

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography', in *Collected Essays: Volume Four*, ed. by Leonard Woolf ([1927] London: Hogarth Press, 1967), pp. 229-35. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

Woolf looks back to Boswell (just as her father did in 'Biography'), to whom she attributes the successful transmission of personality in his biography of Samuel Johnson, an example predating the Victorian biographies that she and her contemporaries are so keen to reject. What Woolf admires in Boswell's style as a biographer is the conversational effect produced in his writing, and not the suppression of the biographer's voice: her reference to Boswell's biographical style differs from the effect produced by her father's interpretation: 'by speaking in his natural voice. So Boswell spoke. So we hear booming out from Boswell's page the voice of Samuel Johnson' (p. 230). Woolf hears the voice of the biographer in his text, but rather than becoming a dominant presence such as Strachey's hero-biographer or a silent conduit or suppressant as Stephen's passive presenter of facts, they are only one half of a mutual and balanced relationship with their biographical subject. Woolf describes the role of the New Biographer thus: 'He is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal' (p. 230). The most effective manner through which this equality is conveyed, when presenting the life of a writer, is through an expression of literary creativity and, according to Woolf, the biographer therefore 'has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist' (p. 231). From a backwards glance at Boswell at the qualities she admires in a biographer, Woolf then turns her attention to the work of a contemporary as an example that expresses and progresses these conventions in her present day. Where Stephen chose to draw on mechanical and inhuman futuristic metaphors, and Strachey adopted mythical allusions, Woolf's reference to the past, present and future is achieved simply through references to other examples of life-writing. It is Harold Nicolson and his book *Some People* to which she refers, describing it as a mixture of

fiction, biography and autobiography: '*Some People* is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction' (p. 232). It is not wholly based on 'truth', nor is it entirely created from fiction; Nicolson's book falls somewhere equally between the two. And, just as importantly as the strategy that he employs, Woolf describes the effect produced not only for the representation of the subject, but also of the biographer:

he lays suspicion by appearing himself in his own proper person in no flattering light. He has a scrubby dinner-jacket, he tells us; a pink bumptious face, curly hair, and a curly nose. He is as much the subject of his own irony and observation as they are [...] Indeed, by the end of the book we realise that the figure which has been most completely and most subtly displayed is that of the author. Each of the supposed subjects holds up in his or her small bright diminishing mirror a different reflection of Harold Nicolson. (p. 233)

Not only does she identify a textual representation of the biographer, but the biographer presented to the reader is multiple. One must look to the self in order to write about the other, Woolf claims; and the effect of this introspection becomes evident in the writing. Laura Marcus explains how Nicolson 'achieves self-portraiture under the guise of biography'³⁵ in *Some People*, a technique that may also stand more generally for the New Biography. This perception of the practice of life-writing as 'portraiture' or 'self-portraiture' does not assume a belief in the work as either an objective or factual account of either the subject or the biographer's life, but rather it conveys a sense of the work as in some way projecting a more figurative impression of both of the human influences upon the literary creation.

That Stephen, Strachey and Woolf each present such different approaches to the role of the biographer and the relationship to his or her subject is testament to the fact that such practices have been the result of subjective (even *fictional*)

³⁵ Marcus, p. 91.

interpretation. Yet, it is Woolf who sets herself apart from Stephen and Strachey in the way that she embraces the crucial element of creativity at the heart of literary biography. Nor does she attempt to stifle the voice of the biographer (in the way that Stephen does), or exaggerate any claims to their heroic status (in the style of Strachey). Woolf's approach to the New Biography, particularly in relation to Nicolson's *Some People*, brings together the reader, biographer and subject in a balanced relationship. This strategy denotes a conversation rather than revealing the biographer as simply a mouthpiece for his or her biographical subject, offering a constructive way of reconsidering the validity of the author's voice as it exists in the text. It is in the very quest for 'personality' that Woolf highlights in her essay, that the question of authorial subjectivity may be readdressed. By viewing literary biography in such a manner, the biographer gains the flexibility to become both the 'paper-author' as well as the reader, not otherwise possible in more direct autobiographical writing. The reinterpretation and rewriting of the biographical subject brings the author-figure back into the text as the 'play, production, practice' that Barthes identifies.³⁶

Woolf's manifesto for the New Biography distinguishes itself from the work of Strachey in its dependence upon biographical predecessors. While Strachey looks back to preceding Victorian biographies only to reject them, Woolf considers her forerunners in order to consider what she can learn from them. Just as she asserts the voice of the biographer alongside that of the subject in the case of Boswell, she turns this idea back upon her own work, allowing his ideas to thread through her own opinions on the literary form. With her methodical movement from Boswell in the past to Nicolson in her present, Woolf then reaches a consideration of the future of

³⁶ Barthes, 'From Work to Text', p. 162.

biography. She concludes her essay by pondering possible avenues for the progression of the biographical form:

Nor can we name the biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow. His method still remains to be discovered. But Mr. Nicolson with his mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction [...] waves his hand airily in a possible direction. (pp. 234-35)

Woolf makes two salient points in the passage above; firstly, she hails an acceptance that biography has not achieved all that it might at the time of her writing, and encourages the idea of biography as an ongoing and evolving project. Secondly; Woolf herself offers an insightful prediction of future evolutions of life-writing, one that becomes manifest in the biographical novel. She hints here that the 'New' Biography will not remain new forever, but will eventually be superseded by something newer, and it is this acknowledgement of the past, present and future of the biographical tradition that provides such scope for thinking about the representation of authors, and which we see performed in the contemporary biographical novel. Biographical novels draw upon the past through their use of historical subjects, the present in their contemporary representations of literary creativity, and the future in their shared sense of the evolution of its literary form. Woolf's conception of the biographical subject seen in relation to the biographer also preempts the formation at the end of the twentieth century of what Paul John Eakin describes as the 'relational self'.

In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), Eakin explores how contemporary autobiographical narratives are necessarily bound up with the stories of others, and how these connections are reflected in the written lives of individuals. He asserts his belief that 'all identity is relational, and that the definition

of autobiography, and its history as well, must be stretched to reflect the kinds of self-writing in which relational identity is characteristically displayed.³⁷ Eakin suggests here a flexibility in the forms of life-writing adopted by its practitioners in order to express both the self and the other in its textual forms; a flexibility, which as I wish to highlight, becomes inverted in the case of the biographical novel. Eakin's examples relate more specifically to contemporary autobiographical works in which their: 'narratives defy the boundaries we try to establish between genres, for they are autobiographies that offer not only the autobiography of the self but the biography and the autobiography of the other' (p. 58). However, if autobiography, as described by Eakin, challenges and transgresses the boundaries between writing about the self and writing about another (as Woolf's assertions about the 'New Biography' and the application of 'self-portraiture' also indicate), then I wish to argue that the same may apply in reverse to biography merging with autobiography. When I suggest that the biographical novel is autobiographical, I am not asserting a belief that it offers an objective account of the life of its author (in the same way that biography cannot be assumed to provide a 'truthful' representation of a subject's life). In the same way that I view contemporary representations of author-subjects as a form of portraiture, the biographical novelists — whether wittingly or unintentionally — simultaneously produce their own form of 'self-portraiture' through the fictional impressions of their author-subjects. In this sense, the biographical novel performs a reflexive action in its use of portraiture, a technique that evokes the spirit of Woolf's New Biography. As Eakin explains, 'our subjectivity is itself structured as a conversation', the implication of which conjures the impression of (at least) a two-way dialogue (p. 64);

³⁷ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 43-44 (original emphasis). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

autobiography may merge into biography, just as biography may evolve into autobiography. In the case of the biographical novel, this flexibility of form and genre is extended to encompass fictional modes of such representation. Viewed in this manner, I deem 'self/portraiture' to be a more appropriate description of what the biographical novelists undertake in each of their works.

Not only does the biographical novel implicate both the author writing and the author written about, but other figures may also be included in the construction of the fictional biographical subject, what Eakin refers to as the 'proximate other' defined as 'some key other person, sometimes a sibling, friend, or lover, but most often a parent — we might call such an individual the *proximate other*' (p. 86, original emphasis). If we consider the intimate bond (as expressed by Ann-Marie Priest) that exists between the biographical novelist and their fictional subject, we can include the biographical novelist as a 'fellow author' in the list of proximate others that Eakin compiles. While Eakin's study relates more specifically to examples of autobiographical narrative that do not focus on the practice of writing about writers and writing, the biographical novel, as a demonstration of these ideas, highlights more acutely the status of the relational self as a condition of the literary creative experience.

In the cases of Plath, James and Woolf, the relational self is expressed through three different exchanges or 'dialogues'. As my study of Sylvia Plath in Chapter 2 attests, it is not only the plural voices of Plath inherent in her own writing, but the many voices of countless others who 'speak' for Plath in biography, that contribute to a collaborative and dialogic portrait through which the novelists Emma Tennant and Kate Moses negotiate their fictional impressions of Plath. In Chapter 3 I consider how the construction and promotion of a public authorial identity is

negotiated through the image of a writer's house, through which the motifs of doubling and mirroring are played out between the biographical novelist and his subject, producing a proliferation of Jamesian figures (rather than 'Plathian' voices). When we reach the example of Virginia Woolf in Chapter 4, this relativity of Woolf as a subject of the biographical novel is more explicitly channelled through the key components of and participants in the process of both visual creation and its interpretation: namely, the artist (both the biographical novelist and fictional subject) and the reader. Woolf is presented as a multiplication of subjects that are projected and perceived through various interpretative and creative processes. These processes are as numerous as the many Woolfs that proliferate in contemporary culture as a result of such a strategy.

Eakin is also careful to observe correlations between his belief in the self as 'dynamic, plural, and changing' (p. 98) (a view earlier expressed by Woolf), and formations of the female subject as perceived and defined by late twentieth-century feminists. He challenges 'the notion of relational identity as the distinguishing mark of women's lives' (pp. 47-48) when he states that 'the criterion of relationality applies equally if not identically to male experience. All selfhood, [he argues], is relational despite differences that fall out along gender lines' (p. 50). As I illustrate in the study of biographical novels that follows, while the motifs that relate to specific author-figures might differ, the basic relational identity-formation remains a fundamental component of authorial subjectivity. Two of these three author-subjects are female, but the inclusion of James within this short list is demonstrative of the universality of this authorial condition. Similarly, we see two female biographical novelists writing Plath (Tennant and Moses), and two male novelists writing James (Tóibín and

Lodge), but this gender exclusivity cannot be applied in the case of Woolf: Cunningham joins Sellers in writing their shared literary subject.

When Eakin predicted in 1999 that we would begin to see a new class of memoirs, borne out of a recognition and assertion of the relational self, his remarks coincided with a key moment in the emergence of the biographical novel. *How Our Lives Become Stories* was published in 1999, one year after Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, from which point onwards we witnessed the rapid growth of such fictional/biographical novels on the lives of real-life authors. While Saunders regards modernist literature as an experimentation in writing about the self, I regard the biographical novel as an engagement with contemporary modes of life-writing, as well as an articulation of the authorial self and other through a shared experience of authorship in a post-Barthesian context. As each of the following chapters reveal, the contemporary portraits of Plath, James and Woolf are read through the context of poststructuralist theory (Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous respectively), and in each case these theories are challenged in light of the authorial representations evident in the core texts. Decidedly humanist articulations of the author-figure are produced, along with his or her relation to the literary text. The contemporary biographical novel can therefore be regarded as a collective response to the poststructuralist death of the author, and a way of reinstating the author-figure within the text, which is legitimised by combining biography and autobiography with fiction in each of the novels. In the chapters that follow, I consider in what way the contemporary biographical novelists may capitalise on the fictional status of the author to produce such author-centric narratives.

Chapter 2 – Writing Sylvia, Sylvia Writing: The Voices of Plath in *Ted and Sylvia* and *Wintering*

In 2001 and 2003, two fictional accounts of the life of the poet Sylvia Plath were published. Emma Tennant's *Ted and Sylvia* and Kate Moses's *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* both draw upon biographical sources and fictional interpretation in representing two short periods in Plath's life. The poet's life and work have already been the subject of considerable attention from both biographers and critics since her suicide in 1963, so this is not an entirely new phenomenon. What is new, however, is the way that both of these novels make explicit their generic hybridity: biographical sources are mixed with fictional elements to create portraits of Sylvia Plath as a biographical subject. The myth that exists surrounding Plath's life (and specifically her death) have also prompted numerous reinterpretations of both her life and work across a variety of cultural media. The 2003 film *Sylvia*, directed by Christine Jeffs and starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Daniel Craig as Plath and her husband Ted Hughes, transformed Plath into a film star. References to Plath's life and writing have also provided inspiration for contemporary songwriters; speaking of 'The Sober Scent of Paper', the musician Nick Hemming claims how he 'tried to capture some small essence of her poems' in his song (performed by The Leisure Society).¹ Both of these film and music references indicate the reach of Plath's influence upon not only literary works but across a more varied cultural domain. They are also testament to the poet's standing and currency as a cultural icon; an issue that returns in the case of Virginia Woolf, and which I subsequently address in greater detail in Chapter 4. In this chapter I will demonstrate how contemporary conceptions of life-writing and the

¹ Nick Hemming, 'Capturing the Essence of Sylvia Plath in Song Lyrics', *Faber and Faber* <<http://faber.co.uk/content/leisure-society-essence-plath>> [accessed 01 October 2014] (para. 5 of 6).

biographical subject, as well as recent Plath criticism, have shaped textual representations of Plath as an author, as well as highlighting more generally the problems affecting literary biography as a whole. I will also consider how such representations (to a lesser degree) inform textual impressions of the contemporary biographical novelists. Through a close textual analysis of scenes of writing from both *Ted and Sylvia* and *Wintering*, I shall illustrate how these contemporary debates surrounding Plath's authorial representation inform the portraits offered by each of the biographical novelists. In addition, (particularly in the case of Moses) I wish to highlight how the free use of biography and fiction permits the introduction of autobiographical elements — as demonstrated by modernists such as Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey — thereby providing an outlet for the articulation of her own authorial subjectivity.

2.1 Plath: Biographical Representations

In her critical study *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (1994), Janet Malcolm describes some of the key challenges that face Plath's biographers. Malcolm suggests that her book stands as an example of the universal issues of writing biography: 'I thought of the Plath biographical situation as a kind of allegory of the problem of biography in general.'² In *The Silent Woman*, Malcolm visits a number of individuals who have been instrumental in the appearance and production of Plath biographies since her death: Olwyn Hughes, her sister-in-law and executor of the Plath literary estate; Trevor Thomas, Plath's neighbour at the time of her death;

² Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* ([1994] London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 28. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

Anne Stevenson, author of the anti-Plath biography *Bitter Fame: a Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989); Al Alvarez, Plath's friend and fellow-poet, as well as two women whom she befriended towards the end of her life: Elizabeth Compton and Clarissa Roche. Throughout a journey that is both physical and metaphorical for Malcolm (she travels to a number of locations in England from the United States in order to undertake this quest), she effectively illustrates how these different people, with their varied relationships to and opinions of Plath, all contribute to the impossibility of being able to create a unified and definitive biographical portrait of her. The same speculative treatment can be applied to the examples of Henry James and Virginia Woolf, as Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate. In all of these cases the author-subject appears relative to others, whether their own artistic contemporaries or alongside contemporary biographers and novelists. Considered together, this relational subjectivity questions the possibility of perceiving contemporary manifestations of the author as a singular and solitary figure, with a singular and solitary textual voice. In the words of Paul John Eakin, the individuals Malcolm visits are all 'proximate others', and as such they all contribute to the production of Plath as a multiple self in biographies.³ Malcolm's book opens with a quotation from the Foreword that Ted Hughes wrote to the 1986 edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. In it Hughes describes what he perceives to be the 'real' Sylvia Plath. Hughes claims that the 'real' Plath only found her voice in the last few months of her life, which she channelled through her *Ariel* poems. He writes:

Though I spent every day with her for six years, and was rarely separated from her for more than three hours at a time, I never saw her show her real self to anybody — except, perhaps, in the last three months of her life [...] I knew that what I had always felt must happen had now begun to happen, that her real self, being the real poet, would now speak for

³ Eakin, p. 86.

itself, and would throw off all those lesser and artificial selves that had monopolised the words up to that point. It was as if a dumb person finally spoke. (pp. 1-2)

Malcolm concludes that the idea of the unified, 'real' Sylvia, as offered by Hughes, is misleading. Each opinion that has been expressed throughout the Plath debate that has escalated since her death has created a new version of her. Malcolm says of the marriage of Plath and Hughes:

Once the plot of the suicidal poetess and her abandonment by the man with the witty mouth was released into the world, there would be no end to the variations played on it, or to Hughes's burial alive in each of its retellings. (p. 24)

Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* offers a very disparate portrait of Plath, rich with other peoples' voices, but not Plath's own; yet it is this disparity that provides a useful tool for viewing Plath as a biographical subject. As the opening lines attest, the first words that we hear are Ted's, and the prioritisation of his name in the novel's title *Ted and Sylvia* is indicative of this ongoing battle for others to speak for Plath.

Biographies of Plath contribute to the Plath/Hughes debate, according to the Plath scholar Susan R. Van Dyne. The purpose of each of these, she argues, can be seen as a response that challenges a statement or opinion made in the preceding biography, or in a publication of Plath's own writing: 'each of the major biographies is in part motivated to counteract what is perceived as egregious bias in the one before. Reading them in sequence, we hear an edgy conversation that has lasted for

three decades'.⁴⁵ Biographies of Plath continue to appear, the most recently published being *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (2013) by Andrew Wilson, the appearance of which signals the move in Plath studies to remove the figure of Ted Hughes from contemporary readings of both her life and writing. Taken together with the other voices of Ted and Olwyn Hughes, as well as those presented in Plath's own writing, the conversation that exists involving Plath and the question of how to represent her becomes busier and more confused, with a proliferation of voices that add to an already crowded dialogue.

In addition to the various versions of Plath that are created by others, Malcolm also refers to the multiple voices and personae that can be identified within Plath's oeuvre. The numerous voices that appear within Plath's writing continue to debunk Hughes's claim that the 'real' Sylvia can and does exist. Malcolm explains:

I thought that it was Sylvia Plath herself who was mischievously subverting the biographer's project. The many voices in which the dead girl spoke — the voices of the journals, of her letters, of *The Bell Jar*, of the short stories, of the early poems, of the *Ariel* poems — mocked the whole idea of biographical narrative. (p. 17)

In other words, it is not only the previously told stories of Plath's life that present obstacles for the biographer; Plath is also complicit in obscuring any textual identity or voice that could be discerned. Tracy Brain outlines the contradictions inherent in Plath's writing that make it difficult to interpret as biographically reliable. In her

⁴ Susan R. Van Dyne, 'The Problems of Biography' in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 03-20 (p. 3).

⁵ The profusion of Plath biographies, so Van Dyne observes, begins with Edward Butscher's *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (1976), a work that appeared before much of Plath's writing had been published. Linda Wagner-Martin began writing *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987) following the mass of publicity that Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981) generated, partly attributed to the collection winning the Pulitzer Prize in the same year. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989), the biography that Anne Stevenson wrote with the cooperation of Olwyn Hughes, responds to the anti-Hughes sentiment that had been influenced by the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s, and is written from the position of the Plath estate. Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (1999) responds to what Malcolm sees as the unreliability of Plath biographies with a portrait that draws upon a wealth of resources from texts and interviews.

essay 'Dangerous Confessions: The problem of reading Sylvia Plath biographically', she presents a single event that Plath recorded in letters to her mother, rewrote in a short story, subsequently recreated in two Plath biographies. An episode in which Plath and Hughes encountered a bear whilst camping in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, is presented in two conflicting accounts in Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* and Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic*. Brain consults a letter written by Plath to her mother, in which the details have altered. In Plath's story, 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' (1959) (which closely resembles Plath's own camping experience), the details are altered once again. Having checked official records relating to the incident, Brain discovers that none of Plath's accounts, or those of her biographers, correspond with what has been 'officially' recorded. In the letter to her mother, Plath states that a woman had been killed by a bear in the park whereas in 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear' the narrator's husband is mauled to death by the animal. Biographical treatments of the event are similarly inconsistent. In Anne Stevenson's account of the episode in *Bitter Fame* it is a man who is killed by the bear, but in Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic* it is Plath and Hughes who encounter a bear directly before they are told of the fatality of a fellow male camper in the park. Brain's examples present a crucial problem to biographers: 'My position is not that Plath never wrote about herself, but that we can seldom know when she did, because so little of her life and thoughts, like anyone's, can be reliably documented.'⁶ If the facts are revealed as unreliable, then the 'truth' that documentary biography is built upon passes into the realm of fiction. What this indicates, so Brain points out, is that: 'the boundaries between biography and fiction are increasingly unclear'.⁷ This also calls both the genre and status of documentary

⁶ Tracy Brain, 'Dangerous Confessions: The problem of reading Sylvia Plath biographically', in *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Jo Gill (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), pp. 11-32 (p. 11).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

biography into question, and highlights a need to address this issue of genre in the literary forms of future biographical portraits of Plath. The tendency to blur biography, autobiography and fiction — evident in the experimental work of modernist life-writers — can also be identified in Plath's reinterpretation of the incident involving the bear in Yellowstone National Park.

In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1992), Jacqueline Rose blurs the boundaries further between those who speak for Plath, and Plath's own literary voices. Rose argues that the extent to which Plath has been written about has meant that not only is her 'real' self impossible to establish, but the figure of Plath has become an icon or a myth through which others — friends, biographers and critics — can project their own forms of expression.

This [...] adds a crucial dimension to the difficulty of writing about Plath — or rather, it issues a warning. What we are dealing with is, obviously enough, not Plath herself but her representations, her own writing, together with all the other utterances which have come to crowd it — joining in the conversation, as one might say. Often [...] it is technically impossible to separate Plath's voice from those who speak for her (a large part of her writing was published, and more importantly, edited after her death). Plath's writings and the surrounding voices stand in effigy for her, they speak in her name. It is this effigy that haunts the culture.⁸

Rose pays specific attention to the role that Plath's archive performs in the construction of Plath representations. She begins (like Malcolm), with a quotation from Ted Hughes that questions the ownership of biographical information, in which he states: 'I hope each one of us owns the facts of his or her life' (p. 65). In this statement, Hughes intended to attack the many critics and biographers who have taken Plath's side and thus held him to blame for her suicide. However, by highlighting the control that Hughes, Olwyn and Aurelia have exerted over Plath's

⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* ([1992] London: Virago, 1996), p. 2. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

literary estate, Rose argues that the involvement of Ted and Olwyn Hughes and Aurelia Plath in the editing and publication of Plath's writing has already brought the issue of ownership into question: 'The question of the "facts", of who controls them and for whom, was, however, what was at issue' (p. 66). Rose goes on to explain that Plath and the issue of ownership is emblematic of the whole practice of biography:

Nothing demonstrates more clearly, however, the problematic nature of such a statement — of that 'own' and that 'owns' — than the legacy of Sylvia Plath. Clearly Plath does not own the facts of her own life, not just because she is no longer here to speak for herself but because even in relation to one's 'own' life (especially in relation to it) there can be no simple ownership of the facts. (p. 67)

While Ted and Olwyn Hughes and Aurelia Plath have published Plath's diaries and correspondence respectively in *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962* (2000) and *Letters Home* (1976), Rose points out that each of these publications is a carefully edited version of its original document. By editing these works, Ted and Olwyn Hughes, along with Aurelia Plath, have asserted their own influences and their own interpretations of Plath's writing. The motive behind such editorial control is the defence of their own names and the implication of the other party in the Plath/Hughes debate. Rose notes the complex construction of voices that speak for and about Plath. The

process of editing, censoring, attempting to direct the interpretation of, and response to, Plath's work [...] [Hughes] already stands as a multiple presence in the work. But the situation becomes even more complex, more difficult, when we add to this scenario Aurelia Plath, Plath's mother, and Hughes' sister, Olwyn Hughes. (p. 74)

Rose identifies the numerous factors that affect the biographer's ability to construct a single, unified image of Plath which is distorted by both Plath and those who speak for her:

to try to construct a single, consistent image of Plath becomes meaningless, not just because of the vested interests that so often appear to be at stake in the various attempts to do so that we have seen, but far more because the multiplicity of representations that Plath offers of herself make such an effort so futile. As Plath writes herself across her journals, letters, novel, short stories and poetry, her different voices enter into an only ever partial dialogue with each other which it is impossible to bring to a close [...] Above all, these differences of writing and interpretation should act as a crucial caution against one conception of censorship — the idea that behind it can be uncovered the single, unadulterated truth. Plath may be censored but, as we have seen, she also censors, transforms and endlessly rewrites herself. (p. 104)

The Plath archive, according to Rose, suggests a loss of any original or universal authorial voice that can be identified through a reading of these texts. Nor can it be found in any biographical study of the poet's life and work. She draws upon Barthesian theories of the author in order to state her approach to finding the 'real' Plath:

Inside her writing, Plath confronts us with the limits of our (and her) knowledge. In this context it becomes more than a commonplace of literary analysis to insist in advance that there is no direct access to the writer, that the only thing available for commentary and analysis is the text. (p. 5)

However, as Rose explains, in an analysis of any texts that constitute Plath's own writing or of those who have written about her, any representation will remain multiple and contradictory. It is from here that the Plath 'representations' become manifest. The process of trying to find the 'real' Plath also exposes an inherent contradiction that exists in the nature of the quest:

One could in fact argue that the more the protagonists attempt to draw representations of and by Plath into the realm of ascertainable truth or falsehood, the more they have the opposite effect — it is the factual which finds itself marked irretrievably by the category of fiction. (p. 106)

The harder one tries to reach the 'real' Sylvia Plath, the clearer it becomes that she does not exist. All that can exist is a profusion of differing representations offered by the biographers, critics, editors and by Plath herself. The effect of this profusion of voices takes the biographer further away from any sense of a singular or unified representation of the subject. As Rose's analysis of these biographical investigations reveals, both Plath and her proximate others are complicit in obscuring any sense of a 'real' Sylvia Plath. This phenomenon is also applied to the biographical interest in both James and Woolf, as my individual studies of these subjects illustrate. Framed within the context of the writer's house and the literary pilgrimage for James, and through the practice of portraiture in Woolf, one can see how each of the authors play with the notions of self-presentation. The more one tries to find the 'authentic' voice, the 'real' author in his home, or the 'truest' portrait of the authorial subject, the more confused and obscured the individual impression becomes.

In *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*, the portrait that Paul Alexander creates of Plath writing at her desk exemplifies the issues raised by Virginia Woolf (outlined in the introductory chapter) regarding the marriage of truth and fiction in biography. Alexander chooses to present her while she is composing one of her *Ariel* poems, 'Medusa':

Today, Tuesday, October 16, 1962, Sylvia Plath worked on a poem that, by the end of her writing session, she would title 'Medusa'. She labored on the poem in the same manner she had on any recent piece. With a keenly focused tunnel vision, she pored — urgently, exhaustingly — over each line, each word. The poem was evolving surprisingly slowly,

through no fault of its own, but because, for the better part of a week now, Plath had suffered from a cold, a sinus infection, and a low-grade fever that alternated with chills [...] Plath had found that the hours between four and eight in the morning were her only quiet time. So, even though she was sick, she forced herself to get out of bed to write. And in the weeks she had followed this schedule, she had experienced breathtaking results – almost a poem a day, some of them the best she had ever produced.⁹

Alexander's portrait of Plath writing her poem 'Medusa' is a combination of documentary evidence and fictional embellishment. Phrases from Plath's letters written to her mother on the day that she composed this poem that show Plath writing about the experience of writing, are dramatised through the biographer's own imaginative interpretation of what he perceives to be her experience of writing. Janet Malcolm describes Alexander as having 'accessorised Plath's journal entry with details' (p. 166) in his portrayal of her first meeting with Ted Hughes, and this extract receives the same treatment.

The first of two letters that Plath wrote to her mother on 16 October 1962, opens with: 'I am writing with my old fever of 101° alternating with chills back'.¹⁰ In Alexander's version, this becomes 'Plath had suffered from a cold, a sinus infection, and a low-grade fever that alternated with chills'. Two other significant sources for this extract are taken from the same letter written on 16 October, and another written by Plath to her mother four days earlier, on 12 October. In these she writes: 'I am writing from dawn to when the babies wake, a poem a day, and they are terrific' (p. 467) and 'I am a writer [...] I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name' (p. 468). In Alexander's biography, the two sentences are fused together to become: 'And in the weeks she had followed

⁹ Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), p. 6.

¹⁰ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home*, ed. by Aurelia Schober Plath ([1976] London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 468. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

this schedule, she had experienced breathtaking results – almost a poem a day, some of them the best she had ever produced.' What has not been appropriated from Plath's letters is fabricated by Alexander to stress the desperation and urgency conveyed by Plath elsewhere in the correspondence written on the same day. The two letters written on 16 October contain the following phrases: 'I must have someone with me [...] I need help very much just now' (p. 468); 'I feel only a lust to study, write, get my brain back and practice my craft' (p. 469); and 'I am as bereft now as ever' (p. 469). Alexander echoes Plath's tone of desperation, but adds a note of frustration to his portrait: 'she pored — urgently, exhaustingly — over each line, each word. The poem was evolving surprisingly slowly, through no fault of its own'; 'she forced herself to get out of bed to write [...] She had experienced breathtaking results'. Here Alexander chooses to make the act of writing rather than the product the focus of his portrait. This extract from *Rough Magic* demonstrates the extent to which 'documentary' biography is grounded in recorded information, and how much it may be the product of invention, once again drawing attention to the confused status of biography, and a need to emphasise its fictional leanings. As the biographer, Alexander becomes both a ventriloquist and a creator. He ventriloquises Plath's words, and invents details to fill the gaps that exist in the known record of this particular moment in his subject's life. The voice of Plath that can be heard in letters written to her mother becomes distorted, and resurfaces in this biography as the voice of Alexander. 'I am writing with my old fever of 101°' becomes 'Plath had suffered from a cold, a sinus infection, and a low-grade fever'. The first-person narrator of the letters is transformed here into a third-person account.

The question of textual voice is one that is raised by this extract from *Rough Magic*. It reinforces the impossibility of achieving empirical truth within biography.

Three voices can be heard within this extract from Alexander's biography, all of which are drawn from or influenced by a single 'biographical' source (Plath's letters to her mother), rather than introducing any poetic sources. The dialogue that exists between the biographer and his subject highlights the intertextuality of such biographical writing. There is Alexander writing about his subject's experience of writing, and Plath speaking to her mother through her letters on the subject of her experience of writing. Within these letters the figure of Plath divides into two personas: there is the sick and needy daughter writing to her mother, and the fierce and strong-willed poet affirming the self-confidence in her own literary ability. In the second of the two voices, Plath writes about her experience of writing. The sick and helpless daughter writes to her mother with a tone of desperation of her 'old fever of 101°' and insists: 'I must have someone with me [...] I need help very much just now'. Plath's statement contrasts with the self-confident air made evident when writing about her experience of writing: 'I am a writer [...] I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name.' This idea of her 'name' or reputation resonates throughout this extract as a central concern for the whole of Plath biography. It is exactly the question of her name that has been debated by those who undertake to write about her life, which changes considerably according to the textual source that is used.¹¹ We see here how it is not only Plath who seeks to promote and define her own authorial reputation, but how each of these writers; her mother Aurelia, her biographer Paul Alexander, as well as Plath herself, adopt the name 'Plath'. This name, just like Jacqueline Rose's effigy, is fought over and obscured by each of the opposing interpretations offered.

¹¹ The use of Plath's married name has been furiously debated since her death, her grave in Heptonstall, Yorkshire, having been appropriated as a physical site of this conflict. Fans of Plath have repeatedly removed the name 'Hughes' from the wording 'Sylvia Plath Hughes' on her headstone, in an attempt to distance Plath's life and work as much as possible from that of her husband, Ted Hughes.

2.2 The Silenced Man: Ted Hughes

The many biographies of Sylvia Plath that have been produced since her death foreground the ongoing fascination with the historical author-figure, and the connection that continues to be forged between the private life and the published writing. The case of Ted Hughes and the reception of his poetry collection *Birthday Letters* (1998) testifies to the interest that readers have in the identity and intentions of the individual behind a piece of writing. The academic Andrew Bennett, in his book *The Author* (2005), draws on the example of Ted Hughes and the publication of *Birthday Letters*, published months before the poet's death. Most of the poems in the collection are addressed to, or written about his relationship with, Sylvia Plath, the publication of which broke the silence that Hughes had kept on the subject since Plath's suicide thirty-five years earlier. Following more than three decades of biographies and criticism in which Plath's writing has been scrutinised for biographical clues, Hughes's collection was seen as his 'version' of the story. *Birthday Letters* has been read as confessional poetry, and as such offers the reader an insight into the lives of both Hughes and Plath. In doing so, a connection is reestablished between the life and work of both poets. Bennett notes that:

Hughes had rarely spoken publicly about his relationship with Plath, and the immediate critical and journalistic response to the publication of *Birthday Letters* therefore included fevered speculation about the possible biographical and autobiographical revelations that the volume might present.¹²

As my analysis of the ongoing biographical and critical studies of Plath has shown, there is no way of establishing Hughes's work as the 'truth' in the debate surrounding

¹² Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 113. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

the life and work of the two poets. What the publication, and, more specifically the reception of *Birthday Letters* does demonstrate, however, is that the identity of the author can still hold value and influence in the interpretation of his or her text. This is not to suggest a simple reinstatement of the 'Author-God' that Barthes dethroned in 'The Death of the Author', but rather that contemporary formations of authorial ideology have advanced to produce a more amorphous impression of what contemporary authorial subjectivity now constitutes. I explore such expressions of authorial subjectivity, as well as how they are articulated in the biographical novel, in this and the following two chapters of this thesis.

The effect of Hughes's poetry is symbiotic: the work is viewed as a form of autobiography (and biography) as much as the life of the author informs the work. If this collection of poems had been written by a relatively unknown poet, it would not have received the same level of attention that his has experienced. Bennett's example illustrates how the publication of *Birthday Letters* has once again questioned the concept of the author (Hughes) as both 'Author-God' and as the historical figure in relation to his text. As Bennett points out, even Hughes's successor as Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, regards it as a source of biographical and autobiographical value for Plath and Hughes respectively (p. 93). Critics have widely contested that *Birthday Letters* reimposes the voice of Hughes, and not Plath. Bennett observes a paradox in Motion's biographical reading of the poems:

the great drive towards honesty [...] is also a form of secrecy. The more closely the poems are tied to biography, Motion argues, the more 'self-protective', the more 'symbolic and private' is the language of the poems. The more explicitly biographical they seem to become, then, the more private and 'literary' they really are. (p. 93)

Read in dialogic terms, the more candid Hughes's voice is perceived to become in *Birthday Letters*, the more his poetic voice attempts to stifle the existing conversation. They lead the biographer further away from exactly the information that they seek. Not only is *Birthday Letters* a distraction in Plath's history and the details of her life, it serves as another attempt at altering the already multiple voices adopted and channelled by Plath in her own poetry, prose, letters and journals. Whether Hughes's poetry can be regarded as biography, or as fiction, it is impossible to ascertain. If it is read as biographical evidence, it will also be impossible to establish its status as biographical truth. However, Hughes's contribution holds as much value as a biographical and autobiographical artefact as any of Plath's own writing or biographical interpretations of her life. As such, it contributes another version of the Plath story and another voice to an existing Plath dialogue.

The debate surrounding *Birthday Letters* and the influence that Hughes's poetry has upon interpretations of Plath's life becomes opened again with the release of yet further material from the archive of Ted Hughes late in 2010, more than a decade after the publication of Hughes's *Birthday Letters*. The archive was purchased by the British Library in 2010, but one particular piece of writing from this archive was released — to much acclaim. Published in *The New Statesman* in October of the same year, with an introduction by Melvyn Bragg, it is claimed that Hughes's poem 'Last Letter' explains on behalf of both poets what happened in the last few days preceding Plath's suicide in February 1963. The poem's title alone suggests its status as the 'last word' on the much-debated period of Plath's life, but also publicises its own status as a document of biographical worth. My own response to the poem that follows here is to its widespread acceptance as biography by critics, rather than as a work of poetry. The circumstances surrounding the poem's 'discovery' alone indicate

the extent to which it was a carefully orchestrated attempt on the part of the Hughes estate to reopen, as well as lead, the debate surrounding Plath's death. As Bragg explains, 'Carol [Hughes] directed me to this specific poem. I know how much Ted's work means to her and how fiercely and scrupulously she guards it'.¹³ The decision to publish 'Last Letter' can, however, be seen as a conscious act to steer the conversation surrounding this topic back to Hughes's version of Plath's life and therefore his version of her work, as well as a (possibly final) opportunity for Hughes to have his voice heard from beyond the grave. Yet as Hughes seems to suggest, it is not Plath who is being refigured in his poem, but himself. Through images of feminine domesticity, he describes how the female subjects of his poem were

Their obsessed in and out. Two women
Each with her needle.¹⁴

Assumed to be both Plath and his then-mistress Assia Wevill, both of the 'Two women' moulded their own images of him:

Two mad needles; criss-crossing their stitches,
Selecting among my nerves
For their colours, refashioning me
Inside my own skin, each refashioning the other
With their self-caricatures. (p. 43)

Central to 'Last Letter' are not in fact one, but two documents authored by Plath, the contents of which remain a mystery to the reading public. The 'Letter' of the poem's title refers directly to a note that Plath allegedly wrote and sent to Hughes a few days before her suicide, and that he claims in the poem to have been burnt by Plath when

¹³ Melvyn Bragg, 'Ted Hughes: the final poem', *New Statesman*, 11 October 2010, pp. 42-44 (p. 42).

¹⁴ Ted Hughes, 'Last Letter' in 'Ted Hughes: the final poem', *New Statesman*, 11 October 2010, pp. 42-44 (p. 43). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

Hughes visited her flat on Fitzroy Road later the same day. Hughes's poem goes on to suggest that he was therefore aware of Plath's suicidal feelings days before she took her own life. The second and third lines of the poem read:

Double, treble exposure
Over everything [...] (p. 43)

itself another teasing reference to *Double Exposure*, the working title of a novel that Plath had been writing at the time of her death, and which subsequently disappeared a few years later. The public reader is not privileged with the contents of either Plath's letter or her novel.

The contents of Plath's letter can only be the subject of speculation, as Hughes's evasive poem asks more questions than it answers. The first line of the poem asks: 'What happened that night? Your final night' (p. 43), with the hope that the truth will somehow be revealed; towards the end of the poem, however, Hughes admits:

What happened that night, inside your hours,
Is as unknown as if it never happened. (p. 44)

Hughes's reference to the events of Plath's final night have now been erased, just like the text of her unfinished novel. In the final stanza, Hughes describes himself beginning to write, just as he was about to receive the call with news of Plath's suicide:

I lit my fire. I had got out my papers
And I had started to write when the telephone
Jerked awake, in a jabbering alarm,
Remembering everything. It recovered in my hand. (p. 44)

This image of Hughes writing stands out as a positive act of literary creativity, in comparison to the double act of destruction performed by Plath with two of her documents. The effect of the poem echoes these opposing images, as though by writing (and subsequently publishing) 'Last Letter' Hughes is also in a position of authority to rewrite the events at the poem's heart. Hughes does not explain what it is that he is writing in this section of the poem: begun before he received news of Plath's death, this could be a reference to a letter written *to* her, or the last letter written *by* her. In rewriting the events, Hughes at the same time erases the historical events from record, just as the contents of Plath's letter and novel have also been destroyed. The closer the poet appears to get to the 'truth' of what happened, the more questions are asked about the historical events.

The fortieth anniversary of both Plath's death and the corresponding re-issue of *The Bell Jar* in 2003 was marked by both the restored edition of her last collection of poetry *Ariel*, and Kate Moses's biographical novel *Wintering*. Both publications sought to honour Plath's wishes and reassert her own voice, and at the same time reject the changes that Ted Hughes made to the work for its posthumous publication; by reinstating the original order of the poems that Plath had intended and including facsimiles of the original manuscripts in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, and by reflecting Plath's order of the collection in the number and title of each of the chapters in *Wintering*. In 2013, on the fiftieth anniversary of Plath's death and the publication of *The Bell Jar*, further attempts were made to assert Plath's own voice by erasing that of Hughes from a reading of both her life and writing. A new Plath biography, *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* by Andrew Wilson, focussed on her life up to the now-infamous meeting with Hughes in Cambridge in February 1956. Despite this significant event being used to bookend

Wilson's biography (a brief description of the meeting appears in the introductory chapter and is referenced again in the final chapter), the majority of this work contains neither reference to nor any sources quoted from Hughes. As a result, Wilson silences one of the most dominant and constant voices that has contributed to the Plath dialogue to date. While Emma Tennant placed Hughes's poetic voice at the forefront of her fictional biography *Ted and Sylvia*, Kate Moses battled against the dominance of Hughes's voice in *Wintering* by reflecting Plath's intended ordering of *Ariel*; yet in this latest biography Wilson takes the bold step of removing his voice entirely. This decision could be seen as a response to the acquisition of further letters written by Plath and Hughes (by the British Library in 2010) through which Hughes re-opened, and reignited, the Plath debate.

Plath's relationship with Hughes has undoubtedly dominated readings of both her life and work, but by removing Hughes from this biography, Wilson encourages his readers to also reconsider both the life and the writing in a different context. It is Plath's adolescence that becomes the focus of Wilson's book and, more specifically, the friendships and romantic relationships that Plath had before she met Hughes. The title of the biography refers to an unpublished poem of Plath's, 'Mad Girl's Love Song' written in 1953, three years before her first meeting with Hughes, and according to Wilson inspired by Plath's relationship with Myron Lotz: 'one of the myriad of Plath's earlier boyfriends who, over the years, have been obscured by the "dark, hunky" presence of Ted Hughes'.¹⁵ Wilson decides that it is Hughes whose presence in Plath's history should now be obscured, but in order to do so Wilson ploughs a mostly new set of archive material. In an interview published in *The Independent* on 6 January 2013, the biographer admits that he did not read any

¹⁵ Andrew Wilson, *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2013), p. 7.

existing biographies of Plath in preparation for writing his own, and excluding Plath's poetry, fiction, letters and journals, Wilson refers only to the written and oral testimonies provided only by those acquainted with Plath before she began her relationship with Hughes.¹⁶ The numerous names of Plath's friends, former boyfriends, and teachers fill three dense pages of Wilson's acknowledgements, and it is evident from the abundance of sources how a plethora of previously unheard voices form a new thread in the existing Plath dialogue. Wilson also asserts that he wishes to remain as objective as possible throughout the biography, and indeed it is unclear whether his decision to remove Hughes from his biography of Plath was an act of condemnation or exoneration for her estranged husband. This particular detail could, like all other details of Plath's life and writing, remain the subject of continuous debate.

2. 3 The Dialogic Plath

To engage with the task of representing Sylvia Plath biographically is to become involved in the dialogue that has been evolving not only since biographies of her life appeared, but also through the writing that Plath produced. It is, in the words of Jacqueline Rose, to become immersed in the countless 'utterances' that address this issue of representing Plath, which together comprise a continuous 'conversation', contributed to not only by her biographers, critics, and relatives, but also by Plath herself. Of the profusion of representations that already exists, any biographical

¹⁶, Suzi Feay, 'Curse that lasted half a century: New biography casts fresh light on Sylvia Plath's legacy', *Independent*, 6 January 2013 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/curse-that-lived-half-a-century-new-biography-casts-fresh-light-on-sylvia-plaths-legacy-8435863.html>> [accessed 14 September 2013].

study of Plath must depart from a concern with establishing an empirical truth, and accept its position within the existing dialogue that her life and work has prompted. Alongside Sylvia Plath, both Henry James and Virginia Woolf have been the subjects of considerable biographical attention; each biographical study offering its own 'take' on the life of its subject and offering another voice to the dialogue which, most significantly, naturally involves the voices of others in the production of their respective portraits.

The dialogic nature of Plath representation demonstrates how appropriate the novel is in addressing this issue. According to the theory formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel as a literary form is distinctive in its ability to convey dialogue within its textual construction. He describes the novel as 'a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice'.¹⁷ The novel is a textual space in which multiple literary genres can become incorporated, creating multiple textual 'utterances' spoken by multiple textual voices (p. 272). Authorial narrators, direct speech, letters, diaries and even biography can all appear within the fabric of a dialogic text.

The dialogic nature of the novel is made possible by the profusion of different languages and utterances that are created within society. An individual may choose to communicate through one of many thousands of different utterances that he calls 'heteroglossia' (p. 273). Bakhtin describes a novel that conveys any number of these discourses or expressions as 'polyphonic'. He defines heteroglossia as it appears within the novel:

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson ([1981] Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 261. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

Once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms of its incorporation), heteroglossia is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. (p. 324, original emphasis)

Dialogism, therefore, involves the presence of otherness within a text but, according to Bakhtin, this is an otherness that the text's author willingly encourages. Considered in these terms, Bakhtin defines the novel as a space within which multiple voices can be heard. In addition, it is within the novel that these various textual voices rely on a conversation in which each voice, including that of its author, can only exist in relation to the many other voices. He writes of the novelist (or prose writer, as he refers to him):

He welcomes the heteroglossia and language diversity of the literary and extra-literary language into his own work not only not weakening them but even intensifying them (for he interacts with their particular self-consciousness). It is in fact out of this stratification of language, its speech diversity and even language diversity, that he constructs his own style, while at the same time he maintains the unity of his own style, while at the same time he maintains the unity of his own creative personality and the unity (although it is, to be sure, unity of another order) of his own style. (p. 298)

The author's text is the medium through which his voice becomes a voice among many others. While still identifiable within the novel, the voice of the author cannot be taken as a dominant influence within the text. There is no hierarchical structure in the polyphonic novel through which the author can achieve superiority as the origin of a text's meaning. Instead, his textual voice becomes equal to the many other 'utterances' that may exist within a single text, regardless of their origin or meaning. Bakhtin explains the impact of heteroglossia upon the unity of a text:

all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms of conceptualising the world in words, specific world views, each characterised by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. (pp. 291-92)

While the voices may be unified, they may also stand in opposition to one another. The relationship between different utterances within a novel can be complex. Though he emphasises that they offer multiple vocal perspectives within a single text, Bakhtin reiterates his assertion of the novel as a platform upon which the multivocal and differing voices exist as a conversation. Yet they still signify the words and opinions of an author, even if the author is no 'Author-God' and exists as a multiple entity within the text. Bakhtin is careful to note that different forms of heteroglossia do not always represent opposing voices within the text, but can sometimes share the meaning with the author, and sometimes with another utterance:

It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accents. The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. (p. 276)

When Barthes asks 'who is speaking thus?' in 'The Death of the Author', the dialogic response to this question is that, in the novel, many voices are speaking.¹⁸ Sometimes they speak alone, sometimes in unison, but the text is a space within which multiple textual voices come together. Considered in this manner, the voice of the author should not be discounted or recede into the background of a text, as it exists as an

¹⁸ Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 142.

equal utterance amidst the numerous others within a novel. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism shatters Barthes's assumption that the 'Author-God' he calls into question is a singular originating figure with a singular and unified voice. The author, when considered in Bakhtinian terms, can now be regarded as a *multiple* entity. I show how Tennant and Moses highlight and expose many of the voices — including their own — that claim to speak in their subjects' name, in order to create the contemporary 'Plath' as a dialogic presence in their biographical novels. As Barthes's later theoretical developments attest, it is exactly this authorial impression that becomes the focus of creative interpretation; we see his author as the 'plural of charms' become manifest through various Plath representations exhibited in both *Ted and Sylvia* and *Wintering*.

Julia Kristeva draws upon Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to formulate her own theory of intertextuality. Emphasis is placed upon dialogue as the construction of texts, rather than speech. She describes dialogism as 'a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralise one another.'¹⁹ Like Bakhtin, she asserts that the text is 'irreducible' to its many utterances, and remains a space within which these utterances exist alongside one another. In this instance, the author as authority cannot exist:

Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality. Confronted with this dialogism, the notion of a 'person-subject of writing' becomes blurred, yielding to that of an 'ambivalence of writing'.²⁰

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez ([1980] New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

In the dialogic novel, the author's voice does not give the text a single or unified meaning. The idea of author as authority is exchanged to allow a plethora of voices and their multiplicity of meanings to exist within the tissue of a text.

Through its dialogic nature, the novel can then be seen as the most appropriate medium through which a writer may approach the task of representing the life of Sylvia Plath. If all that can exist is a profusion of different 'Plaths', then each of these is one of the many 'utterances' that make up the conversation that biographers, critics, relatives and friends and Plath herself have generated on the subject of her life. Each biography, poem, letter, journal entry, and critical analysis exists as an already dialogic text, the culmination of which can be seen as heteroglot in the context of a Plath dialogue. Plath's life can be seen as a good example of a life that has been constructed and reconstructed textually, and as such she can now only exist as a textual entity regardless of who tries to construct a portrait of her, whether they are her friends, relatives, biographers or critics.

2.4 Plathian Appropriations in the Biographical Novel

An author writing a fictional account of another real-life author is involved in an inherently self-conscious act. To represent the experience of writing is also deeply self-conscious by its nature. The biographical novels *Ted and Sylvia* by Emma Tennant and *Wintering* by Kate Moses both offer scenes of writing or descriptions of literary creativity in their respective fictionalisations of Sylvia Plath's life. They are, in this sense, metafictional. Patricia Waugh states that: 'Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its

status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.²¹ In the biographical novel, this connection between the text and reality is further complicated by its hybrid status as fiction and biography.

As a result of its hybridity, two author-figures are implicated both inside of and outside of each of these texts; the 'author-biographer' (Tennant and Moses respectively) and the 'author-subject' (Plath). Neither the author-biographers nor the author-subjects within these novels are depicted writing the texts in which they appear, but the representation of authors in the act of writing — such as those that appear within these novels — explores the experience of literary creativity for both author-figures. By writing about authorship, these author-biographers bring their own presence and function within the novel into question. Waugh describes the characteristics of the metafictional novel:

Metafictional novels [...] thus reject the traditional figure of the author as a transcendental imagination fabricating, through an ultimately monologic discourse, structures of order which will replace the forgotten material text of the world. They show not only that the 'author' is a concept and produced through previous and existing literary and social texts but that what is generally taken to be 'reality' is also constructed and mediated in a similar fashion. (p. 16)

In the biographical novel, the presence of the author-biographer and the author-subject highlight their respective roles as the creator of the text and historical figure. By drawing Plath into the narrative as a fictional character, the authors of these biographical novels openly acknowledge the fact that each of their portraits can only ever be interpretations. Although the biographical novel embraces its fictionality, it does so in a way that documentary biography (such as Alexander's *Rough Magic*)

²¹ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 2. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

would not. Waugh explains how the appearance of real people in works of fiction affects such literary forms:

metafictional texts which introduce real people and events expose not only the illusion of verisimilar writing but also that of historical writing itself. The people and events here may 'match' those in the real world, but these people and events are always recontextualized in the act of writing history. Their meanings and identities change with the shift in context. So history, although ultimately a material reality (a presence), is shown to exist always within 'textual' boundaries. History, to this extent, is also 'fictional', also a set of 'alternative worlds'. (p. 106)

As the existence and hybridity of the biographical novels assert, these 'alternative worlds' are comprised of both documentary and imaginative sources. No account of a real author's life can be regarded as purely 'truthful', in the same way that it is not entirely the product of fiction. As such, the biographical novel asserts a dissolution of the arbitrary binary oppositions of 'truth' and 'fiction'. When applied to the case of biography and the author-subject, we can see how the representations of Plath as a biographical subject change according to who speaks about, or on behalf of, the poet. If there is no 'real' Plath to be rendered in writing, then each of the representations can only exist as parallel 'Plaths', created within the many alternative biographical portraits of her that have been produced since her death. Hughes's Plath will not be the same as that created by her mother Aurelia Plath; nor will either be the same as Plath's own self-presentation. The various biographers and critics create the illusion of their individual Plaths, as each one coexists alongside another. If this is accepted as a product of literary biographical studies, then the biographical novel and its open acknowledgment of its own fictionality would appear to be the most appropriate textual medium through which the creative interpretation of the author-figure can most fully be explored.

The biographical novel is, then, a textual space in which author-biographers create their own Plath representations. Waugh notes that: 'individuals not only construct their own positions in the world and narrate their own histories; they are also situated within others' discourses, are characters in others' fictions [...] others may indeed possess one in ways that one may not possess oneself' (pp. 135-36). What becomes apparent here is the extent to which the fictional authors exist in relation to other subjects, and how the author-subject at the centre of a study is not permitted to 'speak' for himself or herself, but must be heard in relation to or on behalf of other subjects and other voices and through their various perspectives. By comparing the two treatments of Plath, I shall explore how each respective author-biographer comes to 'possess' and 'speak' for her author-subject in different ways.

Both Tennant and Moses appropriate texts within which to situate their Plath narratives, but the choice of texts dramatically alters the way in which a reader is encouraged to interpret the narratives. The biographical novels are distinctive in the way that they appropriate fictional texts within the narrative of an author's life. In *Ted and Sylvia*, the tale of Tereus, Procne and Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* becomes an analogy for the separation of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, prompted by Hughes's affair with Assia Wevill. In *Wintering*, the original order of Plath's *Ariel* poems determines the structure of Moses's narrative, with the title of each of the forty-one poems providing the title of each of the forty-one chapters in the novel. In each case, the appropriated text undergoes a generic shift from a poetic to a novelistic form.

According to the academic Julie Sanders, the purpose of adaptation or appropriation is to rewrite a text from an alternative perspective to its original source. The revised work gives the text a new 'voice', and in the case of Sylvia Plath,

Tennant's and Moses's novels would appear to retell the already repeatedly retold story of her life from the perspectives of Hughes and Plath respectively. The aim of adaptation and appropriation, according to Sanders, is to give the silent or suppressed characters this new voice:

the study of appropriations in an academic context has in part been spurred on by the recognised ability of adaptation to respond or write back to an informing original from a new or revised political and cultural position, and by the capacity of appropriations to highlight troubling gaps, absences and silences within the canonical texts to which they refer. Many appropriations have a joint political and literary investment in giving voice to those characters or subject-positions they perceive to have been oppressed or repressed in the original.²²

In the case of Tennant and Moses and their biographical novels, they are both unable to refer to an 'informing original' as theirs are versions of already interpreted biographical material. Put another way, the biographical sources already present a series of alternative worlds as depicted by their respective authors. Even Plath's own writing cannot be relied upon as a 'true' depiction of her life, as this study has thus far demonstrated. For Tennant and Moses, Hughes's and Plath's versions of this story have already been repeatedly retold over the decades since Plath's death. The novels recreate real people and real events, so the outline of Plath's story is already known. While the basis of the story cannot be radically altered within the biographical novels, the perspective from which the story is narrated can be. As Janet Malcolm and Jacqueline Rose argue; aside from Plath, Hughes has also remained a key voice in the conversation about Plath's life since her death. The purpose of these appropriations is to emphasise some — and silence other — voices in this conversation.

²² Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 98. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

For the author-biographers to address their fictional representations from the perspective of the poetry of Hughes and Plath is not only to confuse the boundaries between fiction and reality, but to open up this conversation within which they too contribute their own voices. As author-biographers, they are once again able to assert their own presence within a text. Sanders states that, contrary to Waugh's definition of metafiction, the process of adaptation and appropriation supports the idea of author as creator in simple terms:

In appropriations the intertextual relationship may be less explicit, more embedded, but what is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer's [...] decision to reinterpret a source text. In this respect, in any study of adaptation and appropriation the creative import of the author cannot easily be dismissed as Roland Barthes's or Michel Foucault's influential theories of 'the death of the author' might suggest. (pp. 2-3)

To appropriate a text is to acknowledge the voice of the original, and then to assert the new voice or opinions that are expressed in the appropriated text. The act of appropriation is, as Sanders states, a political or ethical statement, and for it to be so, it must contain within it the writer's own sentiment. In the case of the biographical novel, however, the doubling of author-figures that occurs produces not simply the words and thoughts of the 'original' author as channelled through the contemporary author, but also the words and opinions of the contemporary writer in response to the 'originating' author. It is through this responsive action that the impression of a dialogic exchange is produced in the biographical novel. And, as the process of adaptation and appropriation progresses, the concept of the 'originating' author eventually becomes replaced with an image of 'authors' in the plural. Through a close analysis of key scenes in these novels — in which the author-subject is represented in the act of writing — I shall explore how the appropriated texts influence the

representations of Plath in the respective biographical novels. In *Ted and Sylvia*, I consider how Tennant's voice as an author-biographer merges with that of the author-subject, as well as with those other influential voices that speak in Plath's name. In *Wintering*, by comparison, I reveal how Moses conveys her image of the author-subject by adopting and appropriating Plath's multiple voices within the narrative, as well as how Moses's own authorial image and voice are conveyed more explicitly as a result.

2.5 The Voices of *Ted and Sylvia*

Many of Emma Tennant's previous novels involve the appropriation of classic tales.²³

In *Ted and Sylvia*, Tennant's frequent references to Ovid's tale of 'Tereus, Procne and Philomela' from Book 6 of *Metamorphoses* become an allegory for the story of Hughes, Plath and Assia Wevill. Tennant draws upon the story of Tereus's infidelity to Procne with her sister Philomela to mirror the marriage between Hughes and Plath, and to affirm Wevill's involvement in the breakup of their relationship.²⁴

Tennant draws ironic parallels between the character of the adulterous Tereus and Hughes. The violent muting of Philomela stands as a metaphor for what Tennant

²³ In *Pemberley: Or Pride and Prejudice Continued* (1993) Tennant offers a 'sequel' to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), the focus of which becomes Elizabeth Darcy's wish to produce an heir to the Pemberley Estate. More recently, *Felony: The Private History of The Aspern Papers: A Novel* (2002) combines fiction with fact, a similar technique to that used in *Ted and Sylvia*. In *Felony*, Henry James's novella 'The Aspern Papers' becomes the frame through which Tennant narrates the story of James's friendship with the female American novelist, Constance Fenimore Woolson. In *Felony*, Tennant transposes the story of James's 'publishing scoundrel' onto James's own life and his friendship with his literary contemporary Fenimore Woolson, to become a tale of unrequited love and literary rivalry, in which James himself is identified as the scoundrel, and Fenimore Woolson the victim of his exploitation. He effectively becomes a character in one of his own novels.

²⁴ In Book 6 of *Metamorphoses* King Tereus marries Procne, but then falls in love with, then rapes, Procne's sister Philomela. In order to prevent Philomela telling Procne of Tereus's crimes, he then imprisons her in a cabin and cuts out her tongue in his efforts to silence her. The Greek gods help the sisters to escape certain death at the hands of Tereus by turning them into birds; Procne a swallow and Philomela a nightingale, the female of which is mute.

perceives as Hughes's oppression of his lover Assia Wevill, as well as for his control of Plath's life and writing both during and after her lifetime. Tennant's appropriation of this already appropriated Greek myth can be regarded as a comment upon Hughes's posthumous control of Plath's literary estate, and his efforts to silence her textual voice. However, Tennant's decision to perceive Plath through Hughes's poetic voice also has the effect of muting or at least of obscuring her own literary voice. The suffering of Procne and Philomela at the hands of Tereus suggests the same treatment of Plath and Wevill by Hughes, a mirroring that casts Hughes in a negative light and which also asserts the feminist stance from which this novel has been written. The reference to Ovid is at the same time an allusion to *Tales from Ovid* (1997), Hughes's own poetic retelling of the tales in *Metamorphoses*. *Ted and Sylvia* is therefore the product of an already twice-retold story. Sanders describes the perpetuity of such literary forms as a 'kinetic account of adaptation and appropriation [...] these texts rework texts that often themselves reworked texts. The process of adaptation is constant and ongoing' (p. 23). The tale of Hughes, Plath and Wevill may be interpreted through *Tales from Ovid*, which itself is a reworking of Ovid's poem. Parallels can be drawn between *Metamorphoses* and the story of Sylvia Plath's life, as both have been the subject of repeated retellings, each version presented from a different perspective.

Tennant's decision to appropriate the work of Plath's husband Hughes, and not the work of Plath in her interpretation of Plath's life has a profound effect upon *Ted and Sylvia*. As a literary figure, Plath's character receives the greatest attention within the novel. It is not Hughes's experience of writing that Tennant represents within the narrative but Plath's, although Tennant portrays Plath as a poet who lives in the shadow of her poet-husband Hughes, whose rising fame is felt as a threat to her own

sense of literary success. Tennant's unnamed narrator says of Plath: 'Why can't she write? When she says that nothing comes — when she blames herself, as all writers do — she sees only the statue of a successful writer, only Ted.'²⁵ The influence of Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* remains a textual voice through which Plath's own is channelled. Diane Middlebrook questions Tennant's decision to write such a novel, considering the extramarital affair that Tennant had with Hughes during his second marriage. Middlebrook states that 'ethical problems are bound up with issues related to literary genres, and to the privileged position Tennant occupies as Hughes's intimate contemporary and memoirist.'²⁶ Tennant's motivation for writing this novel is evidently borne out of her romantic involvement with Hughes, and a need for her own voice to join the existing conversation but, in the process, it is the voice of Hughes that becomes the most dominant in *Ted and Sylvia*. Initially published two years earlier as *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001), Tennant's novel claimed to reveal previously unknown details relating to the breakup of the marriage of Plath and Hughes, and the involvement of Assia Wevill. In the 2001 version, Tennant suggests that Plath was having an affair with a man simply known as 'Richard', but this had been removed from the 2003 version, republished as *Ted and Sylvia*. In this second edition, she also makes a lesser claim for biographical 'truth' within her narrative. While these novels are ultimately fictional, the editing of Tennant's novel highlights that its grounding in the life of a real person places a limit upon what can and cannot be said in the biographical novel. The change in the novel's title from *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* to *Ted and Sylvia* also points to other shifts in emphasis; a point that I will presently return to. The use of the word 'ballad' in the first title

²⁵ Emma Tennant, *Ted and Sylvia* ([2001] Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2003), p. 84. Further references are to this edition and appear in parenthesis in the text.

²⁶ Diane Middlebrook, 'Misremembering Ted Hughes' in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. by Paul John Eakin (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 40-50 (p. 41).

suggests that the lives of the two poets are told as a poetic love story in which Plath is the dominant figure, yet this idea of the love story and the poetic are lost in the revised title. The reordering of Hughes as the first name in the title also indicates that Plath is perhaps no longer a dominant influence within the text, and instead allows him to 'speak' for Plath.

Although Hughes's writing plays such a significant role in the shaping of Tennant's novel, she does not allude to these intertextual relationships in her list of acknowledgements. She draws attention to the novel's form as a fictional/biographical hybrid in an 'Author's Note' at the end of the book. She describes it as 'the story of the twentieth century's most famous — and most tragic — literary love affair, the marriage and separation of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes' (p. 7). At the end of the novel, she lists the names of four women; Elizabeth Sigmund, Clarissa Roche, Hilary Bailey and Alison Owen as her sources of biographical information. The first two had been friends of Plath's, all of whom had provided information for this novel through a number of interviews with Tennant. As Sandra Gilbert notes in her review of *Ted and Sylvia*, 'her sources — such as they are — seem to be people rather than books', and as such, hers does not appear to be intended as a scholarly approach to this subject.²⁷ While Tennant's use of witnesses who knew Plath would suggest that the story is being told from the subject's perspective, through the appropriation of Ovid's tale, Hughes's poetic voice enters the dialogue. The new reordering of Hughes's name at the beginning of the novel's title reiterates this point of emphasis, effectively obscuring rather than sharpening Plath's voice within Tennant's text. Middlebrook also notes the manner in which Tennant's chosen sources appear within the novel: 'Paraphrased poetry by Plath and Hughes is also absorbed, without

²⁷ Sandra Gilbert, 'Dead Poet's Society', *Womens' Review of Books*, 20.6 (2003), pp. 1-4 (p. 3).

acknowledgement, into the narrative actions and motivations in *Ted and Sylvia*'.²⁸ Through an analysis of two extracts, I shall consider what effect this paraphrasing has upon the way that the text can be read. The title of the novel suggests a retelling of the story of the marriage of Hughes and Plath, but the poetic voices of both also appear within the textual weave of the novel. Both of the passages that I address represent Plath's experience of literary creativity, but from two differing viewpoints. In the first extract from *Ted and Sylvia*, Tennant condenses and dramatises the dialogue that exists between poems from Plath's *Ariel* and Hughes's *Birthday Letters* poetry collections.

Plath's experience of literary creativity is associated with the death of her father Otto Plath: his death was a theme that recurred throughout her poetry, most famously in her poem 'Daddy'. Here, Tennant draws upon the imagery that Plath used in her poetry, writing:

A table is to Ted the magic plank: walk it and the writer pressing on the firm, dark wood drops down into the imagination, dizzying, blue, fathoms deep. Or into — as he sees for Sylvia — a catacomb where Otto smiles up, long buried yet possessor of an eye that's piercing blue. (p. 97)

This short passage opens with Plath and her experience of writing as presented from the perspective of Ted Hughes, as Tennant iterates. The first two words 'A table' evoke Hughes's poem 'The Table', which appeared in his collection *Birthday Letters*. While *Tales from Ovid* provides a structure for the narrative, images from *Birthday Letters* reappear as scenes within the novel. As such, Hughes achieves a doubled intertextual presence within the novel. Published in 1998, only months before Hughes's death that year, *Birthday Letters* is a collection of poems mostly written about or addressed to his late wife. In 'The Table', Hughes writes:

²⁸ Middlebrook, p. 47.

I wanted to make you a solid writing-table
 That would last a lifetime.
 I bought a broad elm plank two inches thick
 [...] Coffin elm
 Finds a new life, with its corpse,
 Drowned in the waters of earth.
 [...] With a plane
 I revealed a perfect landing pad
 For your inspiration. I did not
 Know I had made and fitted a door
 Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave.

You bent over it, euphoric
 With your Nescafe every morning.
 Like an animal, smelling the wild air [...]
 It did not take you long
 To divine in the elm, following your pen,
 The words that would open it, incredulous.
 I saw rise through it, in broad daylight,
 Your Daddy resurrected,
 Blue-eyed, that German cuckoo²⁹

By alluding to this poem, the voice of Hughes emerges within Tennant's text. While Tennant writes of 'a magic plank', Hughes's own voice can be heard in 'The Table', where he describes 'a broad elm plank two inches thick'. In *Ted and Sylvia*, 'Otto smiles up' from his 'catacomb'; addressing his words to Plath, Hughes describes how he

saw rise through it, in broad daylight
 Your Daddy resurrected.

Tennant describes Plath's father as the 'possessor of an eye that's piercing blue', yet Hughes writes of Otto simply as 'Blue-eyed'. Another echo between the voices of Tennant and Hughes can be heard in the latter's use of the word 'catacomb' from which 'Otto smiles up'. In 'The Table', Hughes uses the noun 'grave' to describe Otto's

²⁹ Ted Hughes, 'The Table' in *Birthday Letters* ([1998] London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 138. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

resting place. However, in 'A Picture of Otto', (another of Hughes's poems to Plath from *Birthday Letters* this time addressed to Otto and not Plath) Hughes describes him 'Under the battle, in the catacomb' (p. 193). Referring to the line from Plath's poem 'Daddy': 'You stand at the blackboard, Daddy',³⁰ the opening line of Hughes's 'A Picture of Otto': 'You stand there at the blackboard: Lutheran' (p. 193) indicates that this is Hughes's response to Plath's poem. However, 'The Table' is both Hughes's response to the poetry that Plath wrote about the death of her father as well as a portrait of her writing at her desk. Now two images of Plath writing are conjured within the text, as Tennant's image of her subject simultaneously condenses and makes direct reference to Hughes's picture of his wife.

The inclusion of this poem has a contradictory effect upon Tennant's *Ted and Sylvia* as a feminist retelling of the story of Hughes and Plath. In 'The Table', Hughes takes responsibility for the associations that are made between the death of Otto and Plath's writing:

I did not
Know I had made and fitted a door
Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave. (p. 138)

Later in the poem, Hughes writes:

And now your peanut-crunchers can stare
At the ink stains, the sigils
Where you engraved your letters to him
Cursing and imploring. No longer a desk.
No longer a door. Once more simply a board. (p. 139)

'Peanut-crunchers' is Hughes's term for the prying eyes that have attempted to dissect Plath's (and therefore also Hughes's) life and work, just as

³⁰ Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy' in *Collected Poems* ([1981] London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 223.

The peanut-crunching crowd
 Shoves in to see
 Them unwrap me hand and foot³¹

after the suicide attempt described by Plath in 'Lady Lazarus'. Hughes's statement is his attack on what he has regarded as an invasion of privacy by biographers and critics, all trying to ascertain what happened between Plath and himself that might have led to her suicide. On a similar note, Plath's comment in 'Lady Lazarus' criticises the intrusion that she felt by others following an earlier suicide attempt. 'The Table' is Hughes's poetic response to his relationship with Plath both during her life and in the subsequent years, as well as a response to her poetry. The 'table' is emblematic of the numerous attempts that have been made to reveal these details by scrutinising both Plath's and Hughes's writing. By engaging with this debate, particularly through the fictional medium that she uses, Tennant is also complicit in the very act of scrutiny that Hughes attacks in his poem. As Tracy Brain argues, 'Rather than seeing *Birthday Letters* as Hughes's "side of the story", it represents a continuing conversation between his poems and Plath's.'³² By interrupting this poetic dialogue, Tennant echoes parts of it, amplifies others, and adds her own contributions to the discussion.

In addition to the voices of Tennant and Hughes, Plath's poetic voice emerges in response to other representations of her in this extract. The description of the writer's imagination as 'dizzying, blue, fathoms deep' (p.97) is a reference to Plath's poem 'Full Fathom Five', in which she adopts an image of the sea as a metaphor for her childhood and its associations with her father. It is not just the voices that

³¹ Plath, 'Lady Lazarus' in *Collected Poems*, p. 245.

³² Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 200.

multiply, but the figure of the male is tripled through Plath's reference to and description of her father Otto. She describes her use of the metaphor within this poem in a journal entry:

It has the background of *The Tempest*, the association of the sea, which is a metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist's subconscious, to the father image relating to my own father, the buried male muse and god-creator, risen to be my mate in Ted, to the sea-father Neptune.³³

Plath's journal entry depicts the image of the male as it transforms from that of her father Otto and the associations with the sea, to an image of her husband Hughes, before focussing on that of the Roman god of the sea, Neptune. More significantly, it is not her image but the male figure that dominates Plath's note, as it continues to evolve throughout her musings on the inspiration for her poem. This image of her father is transferred onto her husband Ted, and then onto her 'sea-father' Neptune; it is not Plath whose image dominates this passage, but those of the three male figures, just as it is the voice of Hughes that dominates the text of *Ted and Sylvia*. 'Full Fathom Five' opens with an image that is shared by Tennant and Hughes, of Otto rising up from the water. The opening stanza reads:

Old man, you surface seldom.
Then you come in with the tide's coming
When seas wash cold, foam —³⁴

When Plath comes to write her poem 'Full Fathom Five', the three individual images of the male become condensed into one unified yet unidentified male figure, embodied by the 'Old man'. A third image of Otto now appears within the dialogue

³³ Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil ([2000] London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 381 (11 May 1958).

³⁴ Plath, 'Full Fathom Five' in *Collected Poems*, p. 92.

that is conjured by Tennant's extract. Here, the image created becomes the 'sea-father Neptune' that Plath described in her journals. Tennant's reference to Otto as 'possessor of an eye that's piercing blue'³⁵ conjures another of Plath's poems 'Little Fugue', in which she writes — as Tennant then echoes in the singular: 'I remember a blue eye'.³⁶ As Linda K. Bundtzen has noted, what brings 'Daddy', 'Little Fugue' and 'Full Fathom Five' together is the way that they all address the idea of Plath and what she described as her 'Electra Complex'.³⁷

This extract from *Ted and Sylvia* dramatises and condenses language and imagery from the poetry of both Plath and Hughes, and it is Tennant's use of poetic sources that distinguishes this novel from documentary biography. By constructing her portraits of both Hughes and Plath through these poetic sources, *Ted and Sylvia* is accepting and exploiting its own status as fiction. In this extract, Tennant functions as the ventriloquist, through whom the dialogue that exists between the poetry of Hughes and Plath comes into play. While the intertextual references delve into the dialogue between the poetry of Plath and Hughes, this does not extend beyond the realm of poetry and his and her poetic voices. The poetry of Hughes and Plath speak to one another in this extract through an intertextual mirroring. It is through the relationship between the poetry of Hughes and Plath and the prose of Tennant that Plath and her father Otto are produced and reproduced as different images by each textual voice that can be identified within this extract.

In the second extract from *Ted and Sylvia*, Plath's experience as a poet is shown once again in relation to another poet. Like the previous example, her life as a

³⁵ Tennant, p. 97.

³⁶ Plath, 'Little Fugue' in *Collected Poems*, p. 188.

³⁷ Lynda K. Bundtzen, 'Plath and Psychoanalysis: Uncertain Truths' in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 36-51 (p. 40).

poet is defined in terms of the dead: in this instance, the theme of death and haunting is manifest in the spirit of W. B. Yeats, whom Plath had repeatedly described as her muse on a number of occasions in her letters and journal entries. Yeats's life took on greater significance when Plath moved into the house in which he had lived during his childhood, and the pertinence of the writer's home is also acknowledged by both Henry James and Virginia Woolf, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3. Plath moved into the flat in the autumn of 1962 after the breakup of her marriage to Hughes, and only months before she took her own life. Tennant says of Plath's connection to Yeats:

There is something about this part of London, this street, this flat on Fitzroy Road, that invites the writing that oozes up through the snow through the land of the dead. Is it the ghost of Yeats, who lived in the house Ted and Sylvia chose together, which brings the perfected landscape of her new poems, the landscape before the edge? (pp. 137-38)

The image of Otto rising up through the water is mirrored here in Yeats rising up through the snow that embodies the notoriously harsh winter of 1962. Plath had written repeatedly to her mother that Yeats's spirit was blessing her, and in this extract, Tennant echoes the words of Plath as she wrote them to Aurelia. Tennant draws upon the letters that Plath wrote just after she took tenancy of the flat in London. Plath writes to her mother: 'I had the uncanny feeling I had got in touch with Yeats' spirit (He was a sort of medium himself) when I went to his tower in Ireland'.³⁸ In a later letter, she reports: 'I feel Yeats' spirit blessing me'.³⁹ The voice of the text then shifts to one of Plath's poetic voices through a reference to her poem 'Edge'. The 'perfected landscape' of Tennant's text echoes the opening line of the last poem that Plath is known to have written before she committed suicide, in which

³⁸ Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 480 (19 November 1962).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 490 (14 December 1962).

she writes 'The woman is perfected'.⁴⁰ The 'edge' represents the end of her life, and the end of her literary creativity. The image that Plath creates in this poem is of a woman lying dead, cradling her two babies in her arms, while the 'perfected landscape' in Tennant's text suggests a general reference to Plath's poetic oeuvre. The word 'landscape' itself alludes to Plath's poem 'Childless Woman', in which the speaker says 'My landscape is a hand with no lines', which Plath wrote during the winter of 1962.⁴¹ The speaker in this poem is, as the title suggests, childless, so cannot be taken literally as Plath speaking as herself because she was already the mother of Frieda and Nicholas at the time of the poem's composition.

Tennant draws upon the theme of death through her allusion both to Plath's personal letters to her mother, as well as her poetic voices. Through this, she tries to unite these multiple textual voices into an image of Plath, but the images resist any sense of unity. She shows three images of Plath; the daughter writing to her mother, a childless woman, and a dead mother cradling her dead children. Tennant can be seen to impose the images of these female figures onto the image of her author-subject, although they remain semi-independent textual voices. Her dialogic representation of Plath shows, through Hughes's dominant voice, how her biographical subject is dependent upon — and cultivated in relation to — other more prominent voices than Plath's own within the narrative of *Ted and Sylvia*.

⁴⁰ Plath, 'Edge' in *Collected Poems*, p. 272.

⁴¹ Plath, 'Childless Woman' in *Collected Poems*, p. 259.

2.6 Rewriting Plath in *Wintering*

Like Emma Tennant's *Ted and Sylvia*, Kate Moses's *Wintering* features the appropriation of an existing text as the structuring device for her narrative. Moses draws upon the original order of Plath's poetry collection *Ariel* (1965) to determine the order of her novel. Each of the forty-one chapters in the novel represents the forty-one poems that constituted the collection as it had been compiled by Plath before her death, presented in the order that she had originally intended it to be read. Moses explains the structure of her novel in an Author's Note that appears at the end of *Wintering*:

My most essential source was Sylvia Plath's table of contents for the manuscript of her second poetry collection [...] The structure of *Wintering* follows Plath's original sequence for that manuscript, which was edited by Hughes and published three years after Plath's death. Though Hughes reordered the poems into a more chronological arrangement and deleted several that Plath had intended for inclusion, he kept the title Plath had typed onto her final title page: *Ariel and Other Poems*. *Wintering*, then, takes its ultimate inspiration from the manuscript that Plath arranged with her customary meticulous attention, but a manuscript that has never been published in its intended form.⁴²

Wintering was published in February 2003; the publication date had been specifically chosen to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of Plath's death. *Ariel: The Restored Edition* was published in 2004, a year after the publication of Moses's book, in which facsimile copies of the original manuscript present the collection as it was left by Plath at the time of her death. The changes made to Plath's *Ariel* support Jacqueline Rose's observation that the posthumous editing and publication of Plath's work allow

⁴² Kate Moses, *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* (London: Sceptre, 2003), p. 341. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

the 'surrounding voices' to 'speak in her name'.⁴³ Bakhtinian dialogism is evident through the polyphony of *Wintering*, where Moses permits some of these voices that have spoken both for and about Plath through the text of the novel, and to continue the dialogue from the poet's perspective. Rose comments on the effects of Hughes's reordering of *Ariel*:

For Plath ordered her own version of *Ariel* to start with the poem 'Morning Song' and to end with the last poem from the Bee sequence, 'Wintering', which would have opened the collection on the word 'love', ended it on the word 'spring'. This was to have been a collection in which that famous Plath 'aggression' would have been surrounded by a positive frame. The effect of Hughes's editing of *Ariel* was therefore, paradoxically to remove the aggression but to increase it at the same time [...] According to this reading, therefore, Hughes not only silenced Plath's legitimate anger, he also — in an act which explains that anger and justifies its repetition — deprived feminism of a positive identity and selfhood. (p. 71)

The 1965 edition of *Ariel* can therefore be seen as the product of dual authorship, not so much a collaboration as Plath was not complicit in Hughes's act of editing. It is as much the work of Hughes as it is Plath's, and as such he imposes some of his own voice upon the text; the *Ariel* that most readers will know is therefore exposed as a dialogic text as a result. Kate Moses continues to list the other sources that were used in the composition of *Wintering*, comparatively extensive alongside Tennant's short list of acknowledgements, and spanning four pages. Moses lists Plath's poetry, short prose, letters and journals, Hughes's poetry and his criticism of Plath's work, numerous biographies of Plath along with a substantial list of other Plath criticism. In comparison to Tennant, Moses chooses to adopt the optimism expressed in Plath's original version of *Ariel* in her novel; a strategy which forges a closer connection between Plath's life and her writing and which attempts to speak on behalf of Plath.

⁴³ Rose, p. 2.

Maintaining a focus upon Plath with her use of sources, *Wintering* adheres more closely to its grounding in Plath's work with Moses's appropriation of her poetry collection, than Tennant does with her use of Hughes's poetry. This is emphasised by Moses's decision to present her narrative through her subject's consciousness, and in doing so she internalises much of the source material that is acknowledged in the extensive list at the end of the novel. Natasha Walter says of Moses's use of the sources: 'Words, phrases, and images are often based on loose echoes of the sources',⁴⁴ while Green notes that 'Plath's idioms and expressions are absorbed and sent out into the world again, in what is more echo than parody'.⁴⁵ In my analysis of two extracts from this novel that present Plath and the act of literary creativity, I shall explore what effect this echoing device has upon the voices present within the text and thus upon the way that Plath is represented, and to what extent the element of self-reflexivity is introduced by the biographical novelists.

The narrative of *Wintering* spans the last six months of Plath's life, a time that also encompasses the period during which most of the *Ariel* poems were composed; from the summer of 1962 to the end of that year. It is also during this period that the marriage of Plath and Hughes broke down, and that Plath had moved with her two children Frieda and Nicholas to the flat on Fitzroy Road in London. In this novel, the focus is on Plath and her life as a poet and a mother, rather than on both Plath and Hughes as a wife and husband. Scenes of Plath writing draw upon images of childbirth and motherhood, and it is Plath's success as a poet in her own right that remains the focus in this novel. The novel's title is indicative of both its chronological setting and its subject matter; Plath spent the winter of 1962 and 1963

⁴⁴ Natasha Walter, 'A Gloss on Grief', *Guardian*. (8 March 2003), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/08/highereducation.fiction>> [accessed 24 September 2009] (para. 4 of 10).

⁴⁵ Zoe Green, 'On a Suicide Mission', *Observer* (2 March 2003), <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/mar/02/fiction.sylvia.plath>> [accessed 24 September 2009] (para. 7 of 10).

alone with her two children after her separation from Hughes, and it is images of nurturing and harvesting in readiness for the coming spring that fill Moses's novel. The latter reference is itself an allusion to the last line of the final poem 'Wintering' in Plath's version of *Ariel*, which closes the volume with the words: 'The bees are flying. They taste the spring'.⁴⁶ 'Wintering' was in fact composed in October 1962, prior to Plath's separation from Hughes; and in Hughes's version of *Ariel* he replaces this early poem with 'Words', written in February 1963 only days before Plath took her own life. Mimicking the imagery of harvesting in Plath's closing poem, Moses adopts this idea of gathering her subject's poems as the bees collect nectar to produce their honey. When Moses describes Plath producing her poetry collection, we can also see Moses herself working towards the same goal:

She's impressed, sitting at her desk, amazed even, at her own tranquility [...] to feel herself rising above the ugly episodes of her recent life. It's her poems and this move that have done it, that are spoon-feeding her the self-confidence she needs. They are her nectar, her royal jelly; she'll emerge from this stronger than she was. (p. 9)

In addition to these allusions to productivity and nature in *Wintering*, more emphasis is placed upon the process of literary creativity than is evident in Tennant's *Ted and Sylvia*; the above quotation depicts Plath sitting at her writing desk and, therefore, reflects upon Moses as she writes her biographical novel. For Moses, the process of literary creativity also implies a level of control or ownership for Plath and, to a degree, Moses also. Moses describes Plath's creativity as both an assertion of and a loss of control over Plath's own authorial voice:

She knows, too, something about the movement of the poems as a body, how they rise like a startled flock, flying as one, wheeling, spreading chaotically across the sky, finally alighting in the same tree. She knows

⁴⁶ Plath, 'Wintering' in *Collected Poems*, p. 219.

the story she wants them to tell. It is her story. It is where she wills herself to go; it is an incantation. She's giving shape to her life, past and future, with these poems. (p. 10)

Plath's poems 'spread [...] chaotically' beyond her control, at the same time that she 'wills' her story where she wants it to go; this contradiction lies at the heart not only of *Wintering*, but also of the entire debate surrounding biographical studies of Plath. As this debate highlights, Plath did not maintain control over her poems or her life story, and that by rearranging her work, Hughes told the 'wrong' story, yet by asserting the intended order of the *Ariel* poems, Moses (and Tennant), just like Hughes, also serves as a mouthpiece for Plath in the same way that Moses and Tennant also speak through Plath. Yet through their novels, both Moses and Tennant expose the impossibility of their respective attempts to reinstate Plath's voice to the debate, as they add their own voices to the existing dialogue. Moses appears to be aware of the irony when she describes Plath's professional life following her separation from Hughes in the autumn of 1962. Emphasising the significance of the vocal motif, Moses writes:

She was going to London on Monday, her baptism as a writer on her own. It had nothing to do with Ted; this would be her singular debut. She was to be interviewed at the BBC for a series called *The Poet Speaks*, followed by a recording of new poems. Perfect for her: what had she gained by Ted's leaving but her voice? (p. 160)

The irony of this query is highlighted by the title of the radio programme '*The Poet Speaks*', as it is exactly the question of whose voice (or voices) can be heard within the text of *Wintering* — one that remains central to Moses's novel.

As Walter observes in her review, Moses sets *Wintering* out like a kind of journal, and by doing so reminds the reader of the biographical material that Hughes

had destroyed following Plath's death. In *The Silent Woman*, Janet Malcolm draws attention to Hughes's destruction and concealment of two journals that Plath had written during the period of their separation, and Hughes admits to this act of destruction in the foreword to the 1986 edition of Plath's *Journals*. In this foreword, Hughes is fully aware of the biographical significance of these journals. Malcolm comments on how his editing poses problems for a reader

who wants to understand the relationship between the *Ariel* poems and the poet's life. The publication of Plath's journals was evidently undertaken to elucidate this relationship. But "her husband"'s destructive act has made a kind of mockery of the enterprise, since the very journals that would cast light on the *Ariel* poems — the journals written while the poems were being composed — are the ones he destroyed and lost.⁴⁷

Entries for the last of these journals covered the final months of her life, with the last entry having been composed within three days of her suicide. The absence of the documents from this period of Plath's life has given biographers little material on which to draw, and it is due to this omission from her archive that emphasis has been placed on the *Ariel* poems as a key to understanding the last, and most interesting, months of the poet's life.

In *Wintering*, Moses associates scenes of literary creativity with the body and childbirth. In doing so, she draws upon connections that Plath makes in her own writing. Images of childbirth appear in relation to the act of writing, and in the first extract, emphasis is placed upon both physical and emotional pain. Moses introduces Plath's experience of writing her *Ariel* poems near the beginning of the novel:

She wasn't sure, at first, that she could either think *or* write: her mind paced like an animal, desperate to flee, to connect, too frantic to do either. But something happened in those pre-dawn mornings at her desk, some alchemy distilled, concentrating her pain, dripping her fury into a

⁴⁷ Malcolm, p. 6.

purified essence, her own hot *eau de vie*. She had been struggling to write like this for years. Then Ted left, and the real muse moved in. Her poems had been flaming up, sparking, dangerous, for months. There was no sign of them stopping. (p. 6, original emphasis)

References contained in this extract relate to a number of poetic and autobiographical sources written by Plath, as well as briefly alluding to work by Hughes. Quotations from Plath's poetry, letters and journals can be identified here, through which a dialogue emerges between each textual voice. Unlike Tennant's examples, the multiple voices that can be found in this extract do not signify a dialogue between different writers, but between the different voices created by Plath.

The opening line 'She wasn't sure, at first, that she could either think or write' echoes a line from Plath's journal from 1 October 1957, when she had taken a teaching post at Smith College, Massachusetts. In this journal entry she writes: 'I could not sleep, although tired, and lay feeling my nerves shaved to pain and the groaning inner voice; oh, you can't teach, can't do anything. Can't write, can't think'.⁴⁸ Where Plath writes of her 'nerves shaved to pain', this becomes 'concentrating her pain' in Moses's text. The journal entry for this day is entitled 'Letter to a Demon', in which Plath writes of her two warring sides: the failed writer and the successful writer. She explains:

I cannot ignore this murderous self: it is there. I smell it and feel it, but will not give it my name [...] It's [*sic*] biggest weapon is and has been the image of myself as a perfect success: in writing, teaching and living.⁴⁹

It is in this journal entry that she presents herself as two contradictory beings, and it is only her successful self that she calls 'Sylvia Plath'. In this journal entry Plath does

⁴⁸ Plath, *Journals*, p. 618.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 618.

not perceive herself to be singular or unified, but instead encourages the idea of the multiple and contradictory self. As the earlier discussion of Alexander's *Rough Magic* emphasises, Plath was concerned with constructing an image of herself as a poet, and how she would 'make [her] name' as a successful writer.⁵⁰ In the 'Letter to a Demon', 'Sylvia Plath' the successful writer only accounts for one of the multiple perceptions of herself. Whilst in the act of writing, Plath is at the same time writing herself into her text.

The image of Plath writing in 'those pre-dawn mornings' appears in letters written by Plath to her brother Warren during the period of composing her *Ariel* poems. On 18 October 1962 she writes: 'I am sound, fine, and writing the best ever, free from 4am to 8am each day', the positive tone of which is not replicated in Moses's version.⁵¹ Such words as 'pain', 'fury', and 'struggling' are used by Moses to create her image of Plath writing as one of desperation and suffering, and contains none of the reassuring tones exuded by Plath in her letter to Warren. Reference to another letter, written by Plath to her friend Ruth Fainlight a week earlier, appears in Moses's text. On 12 October, Plath wrote:

I am living like a spartan, writing through huge fevers and producing free stuff I had locked in me for years. I feel astounded and very lucky. I kept telling myself I was the sort who could only write when peaceful at heart, but that is not so, the muse has come to live here, now Ted has gone.⁵²

The positive voice of a sister in the previous letter is exchanged here for the voice of the forsaken yet strong-willed wife and poet, who acknowledges that her recent suffering is a result of the failure of her marriage to Hughes. She tells her friend that

⁵⁰ Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 468.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

⁵² Quoted in Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 262.

she is not 'peaceful at heart', that she is 'living like a spartan', enduring 'huge fevers', and yet this produces a sense of achievement in Plath the poet, who is 'astounded and very lucky' to be producing the kind of poetry that she was writing during this period of her life. It is also possible to see further echoes between Moses's text and Plath's letter to Fainlight. Plath writes: 'the muse has come to live here, now Ted has gone', which is echoed by Moses as 'Ted left, and the real muse moved in' (p. 6). The image of Plath writing through fevers mirrors the passage from Alexander's *Rough Magic*, in which both the poet and her biographer exaggerate the claims that she makes in a letter to her mother of having a fever of 101°.

The final sentence of Moses's extract resonates with a line taken from one of Plath's poems, and as such remains the only direct reference to her poetry in this passage. In 'Kindness' Plath writes of poetic creativity as an act associated with the body, which is then taken up by Moses as it is quoted in this extract:

The blood jet is poetry,
There is no stopping it.⁵³

In *Wintering*, this image is dramatised: 'Her poems had been flaming up, sparking, dangerous for months. There was no sign of them stopping' (p. 6). The visceral images of 'Kindness' are exchanged by Moses for those of fire and electricity. The 'blood jet' also evokes images of menstruation and pain, which refer back to ideas of the female body, motherhood and childbirth through which Moses explores her representations of Plath as a writer.

As mentioned previously, while the dominant voices that appear in this extract are largely those belonging to Plath, the poetic voice of Hughes also appears

⁵³ Plath, 'Kindness' in *Collected Poems*, p. 270.

briefly within the text. The reference to his poem 'The Table' creates an alternative image of Plath at her writing desk, as it does in Tennant's novel. He writes:

You bent over it, euphoric
With your Nescafé every morning.
Like an animal, smelling the wild air⁵⁴

In Moses's version, it is not her physical presence but her mind which 'paced like an animal' (p. 6). Hughes's observations here become Plath's thoughts, as Moses portrays her image through the consciousness of her author-subject.

In presenting her author-subject through a collage of references to Plath's letters, journals and poems, the result is the creation of five separate but interrelated Plaths. We see the two murderous and the successful selves as shown in her journal, the reassuring sister, the forsaken wife and strong-willed poet, as well as Hughes's image of his wife the animalistic poet; the many voices of the subject can be heard within this single extract. Moses's use of Plath's texts shows how the writing subject constructs her own sense of self as multiple and contradictory, and not solely as a creation by her 'proximate others' as Paul John Eakin suggests.

The second extract from *Wintering* makes a more explicit connection between writing and childbirth, a connection that Plath explores in her own writing. Once again, Moses draws upon a number of different sources (such as journal entries and poetry) to create a vivid scene of Plath's poetic creativity, as likened to the act of childbirth:

Then she was pushing. This too was how she felt the poems: the brutality,
wave after wave of it. And then, oh god, she felt the head [...] The

⁵⁴ Hughes, 'The Table' in *Birthday Letters*, p.138.

blackberry blood of childbirth, richer than earth. Birth and poetry. (p. 126)

The opening sentence of this passage echoes the entry that Plath wrote in her journals on the birth of her son, Nicholas. On 17 January 1961, she wrote a long account of the birth. In this entry she writes:

[The midwife] asked if I was ready to push. I wanted to be, but I wasn't. Finally, she looked and said I could, if I felt like it. I started to push, putting down the mask which I didn't feel to need now I got to work [...] I pushed. 'My you are a good pusher, the best pusher I have seen'.⁵⁵

By drawing upon this passage from the journal entry, it is in fact the words of the midwife that become reworked in Plath's journal, and reworked for a second time in Moses's text. She also lifts vocabulary from Plath's poetic works when she writes of 'The blackberry blood of childbirth'. The image of blood as black and berry-coloured appears repeatedly in her poetry. In her *Ariel* poems alone, she writes of 'Navel cords, blue-red and lucent' and describes how 'The blood that runs is dark fruit' in relation to the speaker's body in 'The Other',⁵⁶ as well as 'The blood berries are themselves, they are very still' in 'Years'.⁵⁷ In 'Ariel',

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks [...]
Black sweet blood mouthfuls⁵⁸

describes the blackberries in the hedge that the speaker passes whilst on her horse, as well as suggesting a description of the eyes of the horse named Ariel. The last lines

⁵⁵ Plath, *Journals*, p. 646.

⁵⁶ Plath, 'The Other' in *Collected Poems*, p. 202.

⁵⁷ Plath, 'Years' in *Collected Poems*, p. 255.

⁵⁸ Plath, 'Ariel' in *Collected Poems*, p. 239.

from 'Kindness' used in the first extract from *Wintering* appear again in the second extract from the novel. The ending

The blood jet is poetry
There is no stopping it⁵⁹

is condensed by Moses into 'Birth and poetry'. The connection that Moses makes between poetry and childbirth can be found not only in Plath's poetry, but is more explicitly described in her journals. In her entry of 15 July 1957, she writes: 'Slowly, with great hurt, like giving birth to some endless and primeval baby, I lie and let the sensations spring up, look at themselves, and record themselves in words'.⁶⁰ In this example, Plath fashions a self-conscious approach to writing about writing, and how she views the act of literary creativity in terms of childbirth. This journal entry was written more than two years before Plath gave birth to her first child, so it cannot be assumed that the analogy that she repeats throughout her writing is written from personal experience of childbirth or of motherhood. In this extract, Moses fuses together parts of two of Plath's journal entries in order to create her image of Plath experiencing the act of writing as childbirth. By drawing upon these references, the image is conveyed by Plath the new mother (after the birth of Nicholas) and by Plath before she became a mother, and as such the image that Moses constructs originates from two distinct Plath voices. We see how Moses perpetuates multiple images of Plath, just as Plath depicts the creation of her work as well as her own children. Most significantly, *Wintering* can be marked apart from *Ted and Sylvia* in the way that Moses fosters a portrait of Plath through her emphasis upon the many voices that Plath herself cultivated in her writing. For Tennant, however, the portrait of Plath that

⁵⁹ Plath, 'Kindness' in *Collected Poems*, p. 270.

⁶⁰ Plath, *Journals*, p. 283.

emerges in Ted and Sylvia is borne out of the many voices of the numerous individuals who have claimed to speak in Plath's name since her death. By adopting different angles through the appropriation of specific texts, Tennant and Moses expose different versions of Plath. They also begin to reveal the influence of their own roles as the authors of these biographical novels. Moses demonstrates the greatest level of self-awareness through occasional allusions to the role of the author throughout her narrative, and the resultant overlapping of her own image with her representation of Plath. This inherent self-reflexivity gathers momentum as my thesis progresses, and the proceeding readings of Henry James and Virginia Woolf expose a heightening self-awareness not only of the author-subjects, but also on the part of the contemporary biographical novelists. As I have already expressed in the introduction to this thesis, both the inherent self-reflexivity of a text, twinned with the depiction of the literary creative experience, reinforces the connection between the author and his or her text that had been severed by the Barthesian renouncement of an author-centric reading of a text. This effect is produced, regardless of which author (or whose voice) it is purporting to embody at any given moment in the text.

2.7 Speaking Plath

As recent biographical and critical analyses have established, the image of Sylvia Plath as a biographical subject and author-figure finds a place for discussion, and this is located within the biographical novel. To try to understand Plath in terms of any 'truth' is to disregard the wealth of varying and contradictory versions of Plath that exist both in her own writing and in other people's accounts of her life. Speculation

surrounding Plath's life and work has advanced too far for her to exist as anything other than a discourse, and to become involved in understanding Plath as a biographical subject is to become another voice that contributes to a continuous dialogue. In Bakhtin's terms, all the possible representations of Plath that may exist in her poetry, prose, letters, journals and biographies are examples of heteroglossia, but (by the very nature of heteroglossia) no single textual representation of Plath could encompass all of these different voices. Through the appropriation of their chosen texts, Tennant and Moses succeed in negotiating their position within and thus exploring a particular part of this dialogue. In *Ted and Sylvia*, Tennant's appropriation of Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* establishes her representation of Plath within the poetic dialogue that exists between the two poets. In *Wintering*, Moses's decision to portray her subject in the context of her subject's poems and journals involves an exploration of Plath's own internal textual dialogue.

In her review of the two Plath novels, Sandra Gilbert asks:

Should Emma Tennant's *Sylvia and Ted* [sic] and Kate Moses's *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* be scrutinised for their biographical accuracy, or at any rate their psychological insight? Should they be read as themselves 'readings' of Plath's oeuvre?⁶¹

My response to Gilbert asserts that both *Ted and Sylvia* and *Wintering* address much more than simply the question of biographical accuracy or a reading of Plath's work. They reveal a consideration of much wider issues relating to the expression of authorial identity through the practice of life-writing. Any attempt to establish the biographical accuracy of Plath's life would be to neglect all previous attempts and their respective outcomes. In other words, the contradictory nature of Plath's writing (her poems, letters, journals and prose), together with biographies and criticism,

⁶¹ Gilbert, p. 3.

create the notion of Plath's biographical existence as a dialogue. The biographical novel is the most appropriate textual form in which to present her dialogic self or selves, as well as for the contemporary biographical novelists to experiment with their own perceptions of authorial self-identity. Considered in this way, the novels offer a progression from the modernist adoption of biography as a platform upon which articulations of the self and other are explored. Tennant and Moses take their cue from Plath's own technique of blurring the generic boundaries between fiction, the self and the biographical subject, as embodied by her account of 'The Fifty-Ninth Bear'. When Sylvia Plath began to write about her own sense of identity as a writer, she initiated what was to become a process in which others endlessly rewrite and reinvent an image in her name.

Chapter 3 – The Spoils of Henry James: Figuring the Author in the House in *The Master and Author, Author**

The near-simultaneous publication in 2004 of two biographical novels about Henry James — *The Master* by Colm Tóibín and *Author, Author* by David Lodge — drew attention to the trend for the fictionalisation of Henry James's life and writing. The additional appearances of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* in the same year, as well as the preceding *Felony* (2002) by Emma Tennant and *The Typewriter's Tale* (2005) by Michiel Heyns the following year marked the growing phenomenon of James as a fictional character. More recently Henry James, with his friend and fellow writer Joseph Conrad, have been the subject of fictional treatment in Cynthia Ozick's short story, 'Dictation' (published in *Collected Stories* (2006)). This chapter takes as its focus *The Master* and *Author, Author*, and will address the research that both Tóibín and Lodge undertook in the production of their novels, revealing their mutual interest in the significance of the writer's house as both abode and destination of literary pilgrimage. Looking back to the example of Henry James, the formation of his own public authorial image is evident in his writing; he saved his own complex, contradictory and at times evasive ideas upon the literary pilgrimage for his fiction, affirming the position of the writer's home as a key motif in the definition of authorial image. Using James's writing as a starting point for a comparative study of *The Master* and *Author, Author*, I will consider how the motif of the writer's home is

* Parts of this chapter have been published in 'The Spoils of Henry James: Between the Public and the Private' in *Henry James Goes to War*, ed. by Mirosława Buchholtz, Dorota Gutfeld and Grzegorz Konecniak (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014). In this article, I read James's contradictory approach to and active participation in the construction of his authorial image in relation to the value of property and material possession. I demonstrate this through a comparative reading of his short story 'The Birthplace' (1903) and a 1904 interview that he gave with the journalist Sydney Brooks for *Harper's Weekly*, 'Mr. Henry James at Home'. An expanded reading of both texts, situated within the context of the biographical novel, appears in this chapter.

reflected back upon Tóibín and Lodge's formations of James as a fictional subject. I will then explore how this use of the house motif prompts a personal response to their own representations of the authorial self, the experience of writing about the self, as well as their shared literary subject.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the literary pilgrimage — the practice of visiting writers' homes — had reached the peak of its popularity in England. Literary pilgrimages were not only favoured by members of the public, but were also undertaken by writers of the time. In his collection of travel essays *Portraits of Places* (1883), James included an account 'In Warwickshire' of a visit that he made to Shakespeare's birthplace in 1877, the same year that he first arrived and settled in England. The same essay was later included in the reissued collection of travel essays *English Hours* (1905), but the title of the first collection in which it appeared tells us something about the attribution by James of human qualities to physical locations, the act of portraiture usually being applied to human — or at least living — subjects.

Shakespeare's birthplace itself receives little attention in James's essay, although Stratford-Upon-Avon is briefly described here as 'a very sacred place'.¹ In 1877, he is not yet writing from the perspective of a writer: 'The American tourist usually comes straight to this quarter of England — chiefly for the purpose of paying his respects to the birthplace of Shakespeare'.² With its popularity as a literary landmark transgressing national boundaries, Shakespeare's birthplace, as James indicates here, becomes a universal symbol of literary success.³ As the academic Alison Booth notes, James was both aware of the significance that a writer's home

¹ Henry James, *English Hours* ([1905]London: Taurus Parke, 2011), p. 115.

² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³ Another documented literary pilgrimage undertaken by James was to Tarrytown, New York (the home of the writer Washington Irving) during his tour of the United States between 1904 and 1905.

would hold for the reading public, and associated with individuals who were instrumental in the establishment of such literary sites as tourist attractions:

James acquired a house fit to entertain guests at about the time that the homes and haunts genre, flourishing since the 1840s, was being rendered concrete by the foundation of house museums. In 1895, for example, James's friend Leslie Stephen led the committee that formed one of the first literary house museums at Carlyle's house in Chelsea.⁴

Leslie Stephen's involvement in establishing the writer's house as a literary museum evidently influenced his daughter Virginia Woolf and her own burgeoning interest in the literary pilgrimage. Woolf wrote repeatedly about visiting writers' homes, and began her career as an essayist with 'Haworth, November, 1904' (published in the same year), an account of a visit she made to the home of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë. The appearance of this essay marks both Woolf's emergence as a published writer and the year of her father's death; the closeness of these two events perhaps illustrating the interdependence of one upon the other. As my Introduction outlines in relation to Woolf's approach to biography, her involvement in the literary pilgrimage serves as both a homage to, as well as a departure from, the work of her father Leslie Stephen. This combination of affection towards and rejection of her father's work can also be seen in a much later essay entitled 'Carlyle's House', which documents a visit she made to the writer's home in 1909, the property that her father had been instrumental in establishing as a tourist attraction almost fifteen years earlier.⁵

It is the interest that Woolf took in the literary pilgrimage at the same time that Henry James was writing (as well as undertaking such pilgrimages of his own, the subject of which I will return to later in this chapter) that remains of central interest

⁴ Alison Booth, 'The real right place of Henry James: Homes and Haunts', *Henry James Review*, 25.3 (2004), 216–27 (p. 224).

⁵ See Virginia Woolf, 'Haworth, November 1904' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume 1: 1904-1912*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie ([1904] London: Hogarth Press, 1994), pp. 05-10, and 'Carlyle's House' in *Carlyle's House and Other Sketches*, ed. by David Bradshaw ([1909] London: Hesperus Press, 2003), pp. 03-04.

here. Woolf's essay 'Literary Geography' is a review of two books (*The Thackeray Country* (1905) by Lewis Melville and *The Dickens Country* (1905) by Frederick Kitton) from the then popular *Pilgrimage Series*.⁶ Both Melville's *Thackeray Country* and Kitton's *Dickens Country* reflect the Victorian preoccupation with factual detail over a concern with aesthetics. The books contain an abundance of historical information regarding geographical locations — particularly buildings — inhabited by their subjects William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens. In the tradition of the Victorian biography, little attention is paid to character, or to the impact of one's physical surroundings upon the workings of his or her creative mind. References are made to the writers' fiction when literal comparisons are made between scenes in reality and corresponding scenes depicted in the writers' fiction. Little attention is given to the experience of the literary pilgrimage upon the visitor, as all emphasis is placed on the location or locations described. For this reason, the reader is not given any real sense of Thackeray or Dickens (or indeed Melville or Kitton) as authors in either of these books.

It is in 'Literary Geography' that Woolf distances her own views of the literary pilgrimage from those of both Melville and Kitton. In this essay Woolf considers the purpose of the literary pilgrimage, and its effect upon its 'pilgrims'. She begins by immediately drawing a distinction between the two different approaches to the act; one that takes attention away from the literary subject and focusses it back on the pilgrim. Woolf asks 'In what spirit'⁷ one undertakes such a pilgrimage:

We are either pilgrims from sentiment, who find something stimulating to the imagination in the fact that Thackeray rang this very doorbell or that Dickens shaved behind that identical window, or we are scientific in our

⁶ This series, published between 1902 and 1905, also included titles on Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns, Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Hardy and the popular nineteenth-century novelist R. D. Blackmore.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Literary Geography' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume 1: 1904-1912*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie ([1904] London: Hogarth Press, 1994), pp. 32-35 (p. 32).

pilgrimage and visit the country where a great novelist lived in order to see to what extent he was influenced by his surroundings.⁸

By asking what motivates a person to visit the homes and haunts of a writer, Woolf distinguishes between two types of pilgrim; the 'sentimental' and the 'scientific.' The sentimental pilgrim fetishises seemingly mundane objects relating to the writer, while the scientific pilgrim (such as Woolf) seeks to forge connections between the written work and a writer's physical location.

Woolf condemns Kitton's book on Dickens as 'a unique storehouse of facts', and praises Melville for his selective use of detail on Thackeray.⁹ According to Woolf, the literary pilgrimage should have a textual rather than a biographical significance for the pilgrim and, as her essay asserts, a writer's home and possessions cannot offer any privileged insight into his or her life. The closest connection that a reader can establish with a writer is by reading his or her work. The experience of reading itself involves a process of interpretation and, as she cautions in her diary on her visit to Shakespeare's birthplace, cannot be assumed to be based on fact.

Woolf becomes a literary pilgrim when she visits Shakespeare's birthplace in May 1934, just as James had done nearly fifty years earlier. No longer the fledgling writer that she was when she published 'Haworth, November 1904' or 'Literary Geography', Woolf was already firmly established as a literary celebrity at the time of her visit to Stratford-upon-Avon. In Woolf's diary entry from May 1934, she returns to some of the key issues that she considers to be central to the literary pilgrimage. She begins the account of her visit to Stratford-Upon-Avon by quoting the words of her tour guide: "That was where his study windows looked out when he wrote the

⁸ Woolf, 'Literary Geography', p. 32.

⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

Tempest [*sic*]" said the man. And perhaps it was true'.¹⁰ With the word 'perhaps', Woolf throws the authenticity of the literary pilgrimage into doubt. In the same diary entry, Woolf addresses another issue central to her writing on the subject. She questions its purpose, and asks exactly who or what it is that the pilgrims expect to find on their visits to writers' homes. She offers some observations while in Stratford:

I cannot without more labour than my roadrunning mind can compass describe the queer impression of sunny impersonality. Yes, everything seemed to say, this was Shakespeare's, had he sat and walked; but you won't find me not exactly in the flesh. He is serenely absent-present, both at once; radiating round one; yes; in the flowers, in the old hall, in the garden; but never to be pinned down. (p. 219)

Woolf challenges the assumption that pilgrims can somehow capture or trace the author subject as a tangible form. In order to dispel this idea, Woolf asserts her own belief that the author cannot be located or caught in any literal or palpable sense. The home of an author-subject provides a reminder to pilgrims of his or her physical absence: that they were present in the past. Yet, in another sense Woolf endorses a more figurative idea of a writer's 'presence'. She demonstrates this by suggesting that Shakespeare's presence takes on a more fluid form: he is 'in the flowers, in the old hall, in the garden' and not to be found within the four walls of the house (p. 219). Open spaces surrounding the writer's home provide a more fertile source of inspiration, and the image of the home as a confined space remains at odds with Woolf's idea of where, and in what sense, the author can be found. The best way to 'find' the author, she explains, is not to visit their homes and haunts but to read their writing. Woolf says of Shakespeare's grave: 'down there one foot from me lay the little bones that had spread over the world this vast illumination' (p. 219). While the

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 4: 1931-1935* ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), p. 219 (9 May 1934). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

mortal remains of the writer may lie beneath the feet of the pilgrims, the more powerful and far-reaching influence comes from the 'illumination' created by his writing. It is the power of this writing, Woolf emphasises here, that transcends both physical and temporal boundaries. She notes: 'his genius flowed out of him, & is still here in Stratford. They were acting As you like it [*sic*] I think in the theatre' (p. 220). It is with this emphasis upon the textual rather than the literal that Woolf endorses the practice of the literary pilgrimage.

Maintaining the connection that her father had established during his lifetime, Woolf undertook another literary pilgrimage of her own when she visited an already famous Henry James in Rye in August 1907, one of her father's acquaintances. By this time, Virginia Woolf was already a published author (with her early essays), but she was yet to publish her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915). By contrast, Henry James was by then already an established writer, having returned from his year-long publicity tour of the United States of 1904-05 two years earlier — at around the same time that Woolf was reviewing the *Pilgrimage Series*. For an aspiring writer such as Woolf in 1907, James was an example of literary success; just as Shakespeare had been for James three decades earlier. Woolf's visit to James is recorded in a letter she writes to her friend Violet Dickinson on 25 August:

Well then, we went and had tea with Henry James today, and Mr and Mrs [George] Prothero, at the golf club; and Henry James fixed me with his staring blank eye — it is like a child's marble — and said "My dear Virginia, they tell me — they tell me — they tell me — that you — as indeed being your fathers [*sic*] daughter nay your grandfathers [*sic*] grandchild — the descendant I may say of a century — of a century — of quill pens and ink — ink — ink pots, yes, yes, yes, they tell me — ahm m m — that you, that you, that you *write* in short." This went on in the public street, while we all waited, as farmers wait for the hen to lay an egg — do they? — nervous, polite, and now on this foot now on that. I felt like a condemned person, who sees the knife drop and stick and drop

again. Never did any woman hate 'writing' as much as I do. But when I am old and famous I shall discourse like Henry James.¹¹

In this account, the attention remains focussed on the person, rather than on any house or possessions. The first image Woolf presents of James is of 'his staring blank eye', the reference to which emphasises the heightened sense of observation apparent in this account. It is not Woolf's impression of James that she depicts, but rather his impression of her as perceived through Woolf's eyes; both she and James become the focus of each other's gaze. Woolf then proceeds to quote James's speech, although it is not possible to ascertain how accurate this quotation is, or to what extent she exaggerates his words for comic effect. As James's words reveal, Woolf's own identity as a writer is mediated through her relatives. He refers to her as her 'fathers [*sic*] daughter' and her 'grandfathers [*sic*] grandchild' rather than being identified as a literary figure in her own right. Woolf too is complicit in creating her own image as a writer through the image of another, when she claims (however ironically): 'when I am older I shall discourse like Henry James'.

In this short passage, the focus of attention continually swings back and forth between Woolf and James. The movement from one to the other is mimicked by Woolf's observation of the chickens' feet, 'now on this foot now on that'. As part of the caricature that Woolf creates of both herself and James, she likens herself and her companions to 'farmers waiting', as James behaves like a 'hen' laying an egg. Woolf then describes herself as feeling 'like a condemned person'. As Woolf's account illustrates, her perception or interpretation of herself and her subject continues to change. James's impression of Woolf is channelled through the identities of others. Although Woolf states: 'when I am old and famous I shall discourse like Henry James', to be 'like' Henry James is to have an eye like a child's marble, while at the

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Flight of the Mind: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume 1: 1888-1912*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), p.306 (original emphasis).

same time it is to be like a hen laying an egg. To be 'like' Henry James is to be a comic caricature that continues changing, just like the 'flowers, in the old hall, in the garden' of Shakespeare's birthplace continue to grow and change, 'but never to be pinned down' with one stable identity.¹² If the living writer is a construct, then representations of the dead writer are also almost certainly a fiction. What is significant here is how Woolf articulates these fictions through the image of the writer's home, through which her own sense of authorial identity begins to emerge.

3.1 James and 'The Birthplace'

Henry James wrote about the literary pilgrimage in his 1903 short story, 'The Birthplace' after he had moved from London to Lamb House, his primary residence until shortly before his death in 1916. His decision to write about the literary pilgrimage is testament to its popularity at the time of the story's composition. 'The Birthplace' follows the tradition of many of his other tales of the literary life written around the same time — 'The Aspern Papers' (1888), 'The Death of the Lion' (1894), and 'The Real Right Thing' (1899) — in which he calls for the reading public not to pry into the details of a writer's private life, but to consider the life as separate to the writing.

A preoccupation with houses and possessions can be seen in James's fiction at the same time that he relocated to Rye. It was around the time of this move that his fiction reflected a relatively new preoccupation with the idea of the house and the

¹² Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 4: 1931-1935*, p. 219.

objects contained within.¹³ The motif of the material object is one that is closely connected with the idea of the house in such examples of James's fiction, most explicitly expressed in *The Spoils of Poynton*. To invest such extraneous biographical importance to a collection of material objects (such as the doorbell or window) is to fetishise these items. According to David Lodge, the characters of Henry James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton* fetishise the antiques contained within Poynton Hall.

Lodge defines the term as follows:

The word 'fetish' literally denotes an object invested with magic or supernatural properties in primitive religion, and when we say colloquially that somebody 'makes a fetish' of something, we mean that they attribute an exaggerated or irrational importance to it.¹⁴

In 'The Birthplace' the items on display in a number of the rooms in the house are treated with the same kind of fetishism by the Gedges and their visitors. Unlike in *The Spoils of Poynton*, where the 'spoils' are not once described, the objects of 'The Birthplace' in contrast receive greater attention.

In 'The Birthplace', Henry James satirises the idea of the literary pilgrimage, through the characters Morris and Isabel Gedge; both recently appointed tenants and tour-guides at the house of an unnamed English poet, located in the Midlands. Although the identity of the poet is never revealed by the narrator (or indeed by James), teasing allusions are made to William Shakespeare as the subject of the story and iconic figure once again associated with the literary pilgrimage. In his notebook entry on the source of inspiration for 'The Birthplace', James outlines 'the odd case of the couple who had formerly (before the present incumbents) been for a couple of

¹³ In 1897, James published *The Spoils of Poynton*, in which the antique contents of a house lie at the centre of the novel's action. 'The Turn of the Screw', James's most renowned haunted house story, was published in 1898, only a year after his move to Rye.

¹⁴ David Lodge, 'The Art of Ambiguity' in *After Bakhtin: Fiction and Criticism*, (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 129-42 (p. 141).

years—or a few—the people in charge of the Shak~~e~~speare house—the Birthplace'.¹⁵ In the published story the Poet (always referred to in the story with a capital 'P') is never referred to by name, and by the time that James was revising the story for inclusion in the New York Edition of his works in 1909, no specific references are made to the poet's identity. In the preface to this edition he writes of 'the mentioned adventure of a good intelligent man rather recently appointed to the care of a great place of pilgrimage, a shrine sacred to the piety and curiosity of the whole English speaking race'.¹⁶ In choosing to abandon the specific reference to Shakespeare in the development of his short story, 'The Birthplace' can be read as a more general comment on the assumed public value of the literary pilgrimage that echoes beliefs that James also expressed in his personal writing.

Separating the writing from the personal life is a recurrent theme in James's shorter fiction, and his desire to keep such details away from a prying public is well documented by his biographers. In 'The Birthplace,' Morris Gedge notes the lack of biographical detail available about the unnamed Poet: 'Well, we don't know. There's very little *to* know. He covered his tracks as no other human being has done'.¹⁷ As a writing subject of whom little biographical detail is now known, Shakespeare would be, for James, an aspirational figure. Shakespeare therefore provides an ideal model through whom the popular tradition of the literary pilgrimage can be satirised. By keeping the identity of the Poet anonymous in his story, James is able to use it as a general comment on the public's preoccupation with the private life of the writer. In a letter to his nephew Harry, written over a decade later in April 1914, James writes:

¹⁵ Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. by F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 306 (12 June 1901).

¹⁶ James, *The Altar of the Dead, The Beast in the Jungle, The Birthplace, and other tales* ([1909] London: Macmillan, 1922), p. xii.

¹⁷ James, 'The Birthplace' in *The Birthplace* ([1903] London: Hesperus Press, 2012), p. 34 (original emphasis). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

My sole wish is to frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter — which, I know, is but so imperfectly impossible. Still, one can do something, and I have long thought of launching, by a provision of my will, a curse not less explicit than Shakespeare's own on any such as try to move my bones.¹⁸

In this letter, one can see how James uses Shakespeare as an example through whom to cultivate an image of himself. In other words, James uses the image of another writer-figure in order to write about himself. While James affirms his strong desire to keep the personal details of his life away from the public, he at the same time acknowledges the apparent 'imperfectly impossible' attempts to do so. The writer is aware that, despite such efforts to conceal the details during his own lifetime, he cannot control posthumous interest from his biographers. As the literary critic Tony Tanner notes, 'The Birthplace' was written in the summer of 1902, when James was 'clearly at the summit of his powers'.¹⁹ James would naturally be thinking about his own reputation as a writer, and the story is testament to his self-awareness as a figure of increasing public interest.

The sardonic tone of 'The Birthplace' is evident throughout the narrative, as James uses effusive language to describe the house that the Gedges occupy. The narrative follows the Gedges' growing realisation that the author cannot be found in the house, despite their and the visitors' efforts to find the poet. Friends of the Gedges (a Mr. and Mrs. B.D. Hayes of New York) encourage them to see the artifice of the literary pilgrimage. After establishing that there is 'no such person' (p. 46) as the author to be found there, Mrs. Hayes asks: 'Then if there's no author, if there's nothing to be said but that there isn't anybody [...] why in the world should there be a house?' (p. 47). Mrs Hayes's query calls into question not only the relevance of the

¹⁸ James, *The Letters of Henry James Volume 4: 1895-1916*, ed. by Leon Edel (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984), p.806 (07 April 1914).

¹⁹ Tony Tanner, 'The Birthplace' in *Henry James: The Shorter Fiction: Reassessments*, ed. by N. H. Reeve (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 77-94 (p. 77).

Gedges' work, but also more generally the value and practice of visiting writers' homes. James also adopts language that implies a perception of the writer as akin to a deity. The birthplace is described as 'The shrine at which he was to preside [...] the most sacred known to the steps of men, the early home of the supreme poet, the Mecca of the English-speaking race' (p. 5), while the unnamed Poet is referred to in the third person not once described by name but with a capital 'H': Morris Gedge refers to 'Him, Him, HIM!' (p. 8), while the tourists who flock to this house are correspondingly described in the tale as 'pilgrims' (p. 13).

As my reading of the story illustrates, equally exaggerated value is attributed to the material objects as is applied to the intangible perception of the dead writer. The narrator comments on the value invested in the material objects kept within the home, as seen through Morris Gedge's eyes:

The exhibitional side of the establishment had struck him, even on arrival, as qualifying too much its character [...] the three or four rooms bristled overmuch, in the garish light of day, with busts and relics, not even ostensibly always *His*, old prints, and old editions, old objects fashioned in His likeness, furniture 'of the time' and autographs of celebrated worshippers [...] It was not till months had elapsed that he found how little they had to tell him, and he was quite at his ease with them when he knew they were by no means where his sensibility had first placed them. (p. 23, original emphasis)

Rather than forging closer connections between the Gedges, their visitors, and the poet, the material possessions serve merely to shift the focus away from him. The 'old prints' and 'old objects fashioned in his likeness' suggest artists' impressions of the poet but not accurate portraits. The 'furniture of the time', described in inverted commas implies an anachronistic replication of furniture rather than an authentic display of original items. Lastly, the 'autographs of celebrated worshippers' reflect the reputation of the poet indirectly by exhibiting the celebrity status of some of his more notable followers, rather than the Poet himself. Together, the collection of relics

provides more information about other people than it does about the poet whose home they occupy.

In addition to the abundance of objects contained within the house, there is the comparatively sparse 'sublime Chamber of Birth' (p. 24), a room that Gedge soon comes to favour because it stands in stark contrast to the rest of the house:

It was as empty as a shell of which the kernel has withered, and contained neither busts nor prints nor early copies; it contained only the Fact — *the* Fact itself — which, as he stood sentient there at midnight, our friend, holding his breath, allowed to sink into him. He *had* to take it as the place where the spirit would most walk and where he would therefore be most to be met, with possibilities of recognition and reciprocity. (p. 24, original emphasis)

The room, Gedge initially claims, contains only the 'Fact', despite Isabel's earlier admission that there aren't after all that many facts uncovered that relate to the subject's life. If there is no evidence that he was born in that room, then there can be no fact, and the less that is known about the poet, then the more the life becomes exposed to speculation. The 'Chamber of Birth' is the room that Morris chooses to visit most often on his own, precisely because it functions as a blank canvas upon which he can project his own created impressions of the poet. Throughout the narrative of 'The Birthplace', Morris Gedge realises that the qualities brought to the home of the poet are created not by the numerous objects contained within the house, but by himself, his wife, and the hordes of visitors. Gedge realises that:

It isn't about Him - nothing's about Him. None of Them care tuppence about Him. The only thing They care about is this empty shell — or rather, for it isn't empty, the extraneous, preposterous stuffing of it. (p. 25)

He acknowledges the public's desire to fetishise the seemingly random objects contained within the house, the process of forging arbitrary connections between

material objects that now occupy a space, and the intangible author who once lived there.

In 'The Birthplace,' the house is significant not only for what it contains, but also for the physical space that it creates, and both ideas of objects and space are instrumental in the construction of the 'author'. The impression of the author created there is influenced as much by what is present as by what is absent, and the Gedges begin to realise these effects through the course of the narrative. The contrasting 'three or four rooms [...] bristl[ing] overmuch' (p. 23) and the empty 'Chamber of Birth' (p. 24) illustrate how these opposing characteristics function in the narrative.

Once the Gedges realise the artifice of the literary pilgrimage, they consider whether to resign as caretakers and tour-guides and acknowledge the practice as a sham, or to exploit the contradictions inherent in their work: they decide to do the latter. Morris announces to his wife: 'What we can say is that things have been said; that's all we have to do with' (p. 25). The popularity of the birthplace increases as the speculative stories that they tell in and about the house generate unprecedented interest in the poet and his former home. The only detail that they can be certain of, as Morris notes at the end of the story, is the public's fascination with the life of the poet and the financial reward of this literary tourism: 'The receipts, it appears, speak [...] Well, volumes. They tell the truth' (pp. 74-75). When Mr. and Mrs. Hayes return to the birthplace over a year following their initial visit, they can see how Morris Gedge embraces the ironies evident in his work. He delivers his monologue to Mr. and Mrs. Hayes:

We stand here, you see, in the old living-room, happily still to be reconstructed in the mind's eye, in spite of the havoc of time, which we have fortunately, of late years, been able to arrest. It was of course rude and humble, but it must have been snug and quaint, and we have at least the pleasure of knowing that the tradition in respect to the features that do remain is delightfully uninterrupted. (pp. 59-60)

Gedge contradicts his own words within the first two sentences of his speech. He undermines the certainty of some of his statements with his use of speculative language. The old living room is to be both 'reconstructed in the mind's eye', while at the same time, he claims that he and his visitors 'have at least the pleasure of knowing' what it must have been like. It is this inherent disparity between *imagining* and *claiming to know* that summarises the Gedges's' quest, as well as that of their visitors. In his notebook entry on 'The Birthplace' James describes the Gedges as 'strange sceptics, iconoclasts, positive negationists',²⁰ thereby illustrating the contradictory and ironic nature of his characters.

Morris Gedge is described by the narrator as 'insisting as solemnly and softly, for his bewildered hearers, as over a pulpit-edge' (p. 60). Likened to a clergyman delivering a sermon (his literary subject already deemed a deity to be worshipped), the earnestness with which Gedge is portrayed, using the repeated religious motifs, only helps to heighten the absurdity of his speech. He continues to try asserting the authenticity of the room that he describes: 'You may find elsewhere eminence of a considerable order, but where shall you find *with* it, don't you see, changes, after all, so few, and the contemporary element caught so, as it were, in the very fact?' (p. 60, original emphasis). Moments later, his guests are surprised to see Gedge respond to his own claim: 'they started, at this point, almost jumped, when, by as rapid a transition, he made, toward the old fireplace, a dash that seemed to illustrate, precisely, the act of eager catching' (p. 61). By physically performing the act of trying to seize the poet, or at least the facts of his life, Gedge only succeeds in proving that there is no such thing or person there to catch. Mr. and Mrs. Hayes describe this dissonance and the elusiveness of the author in different terms:

²⁰ James, *Notebooks*, p. 306.

He escapes us like a thief in the night, carrying off — well, carrying off everything. And people pretend to catch Him like a flown canary, over whom you can close your hand and put Him back. He won't *go* back; he won't *come* back [...] This man isn't anywhere. I defy you to catch Him. (p. 42, original emphasis)

'He', the poet, is described in more derogatory terms than have previously been used in the story, and Gedge, with his attempt to catch the poet during his speech to the Hayes, is also implicated in this statement. Referred to with the deifying capital 'H' throughout the earlier part of the narrative, he is now reduced to a criminal or an animal once the Gedges and their friends establish the futility of their quest to 'find' the author. Both the 'thief' and the 'canary' are representative of beings that belong in a locked cage, but the poet neither belongs to nor can be placed in such a setting, and these become symbols of the poet's elusiveness.

As Gedge's sermon progresses, he becomes even bolder in his contradictions, as the language that he chooses is more explicit in its discrepancies. He closes his speech with one final search for the poet as a child:

if we could look close enough, we should find the hearthstone scraped with His little feet — that we see the inconceivable child gazing into the blaze of the old oaken log and making out there pictures and stories. (p. 61)

Here he outlines the problem at the heart of the literary pilgrimage: that what they try to find is beyond the realm of possibility. It is not the 'inconceivable child' who makes out pictures and stories as Gedge's scene suggests but Gedge himself, along with his pilgrims.

Later in the same speech, Morris Gedge exploits more obviously the fetishisation of the material object and its connection with the poet, as practiced by the pilgrims:

It's not often that in the early home of genius and renown, the whole tenor of existence is laid so bare, not often that we are able to retrace, from point to point and from step to step, its connection with objects, with influences — to build it round again with the little solid facts out of which it sprang. (p. 60)

Gedge now contradicts his original belief in the quest for the author when he first arrived at the birthplace, by deliberately exaggerating the points that he makes about the relationship between material objects and the intangible author, and the precariousness of 'fact' upon which these details are built. When he pretends to catch the facts held by the material objects contained within the house, he exposes the disconnection between these objects and the process of imagining the poet. Describing the facts as 'solid', like another material object such as a chair or a hearthstone, only serves to show how arbitrary are the connections made between material possessions and the search for the author on the literary pilgrimage. James's story opens with the line 'It seemed to them at first, the offer, too good to be true' (p. 3), but it is not until the narrative unfolds that we see how elusive this 'truth' remains, and therefore how pertinent these opening lines are revealed to be.

James's naive acceptance of the writer's birthplace as sacred — as it is expressed in his account of visiting Stratford-upon-Avon in 'In Warwickshire' — develops into profound irony and skepticism once he has himself become a successful and famous writer. It is a suspicion that is echoed by Woolf, as she exercises through the example of the now universal symbol of literary celebrity and biographical mystery: William Shakespeare. As the writings of both of these authors reveal, the point of interest remains as much on the pilgrim as it does on the literary subject. As a combined allusion to Shakespeare and a projection of his own authorial status captured in fiction, 'The Birthplace' can be regarded as an early example of the experimentation in life-writing identified by Max Saunders. It is only through the

fictional form (James in his short story, and Woolf through her letter, essay and diary entry) that this self-reflexiveness can be fully explored.

3.2 The Celebrity Writer and the Celebrity Home

Virginia Woolf's 1907 visit to Rye reveals that the 'old and famous' Henry James was at this time already considered to be a literary celebrity among his contemporaries.²¹ As the academic Richard Salmon notes, James was both aware of and involved in the emergence of the author as a celebrity at this time: 'From as early as the 1870s, James had recognised that the cultural situation of the modern author was changing'.²² While James's dislike of public intrusion has been publicised by both himself and his biographers, he was becoming increasingly aware of the threat that this flourishing celebrity status posed to the protection of his privacy.

With the literary pilgrimage continuing to be as popular at this time as it had been since the 1840s, public interest in the homes of living writers was growing, and the writer's house was instrumental in this public construction of the author as a celebrity figure. Salmon explains,

As [James] was only too aware, authors themselves were often the subjects of publicity: far from escaping the glare, the author's private 'workroom' became one of the most conspicuous objects of public knowledge towards the end of the nineteenth century. (p. 78)

James's short stories about the literary life in the 1890s, written at a time when the author was emerging as a celebrity figure, can be read as a reaction against such

²¹ Woolf, *The Flight of the Mind*, p.306.

²² Richard Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity* ([1997] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 78. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

intrusions into the author's private life, and as a way of defending an author's right to a 'blessed and uninvaded workroom' (p. 77). While his resistance to this trend can be seen in many of his short stories on the writing life, they also revealed a sense of futility in this resistance, as Salmon also recognises:

far from merely celebrating the sanctity of an autonomous space of creative labour, James persistently questioned both its utility and its possibility [...] The possibility of preserving an 'uninvaded workroom' is precisely what is at issue in many of his most celebrated tales of the 'literary life', as well as in numerous critical commentaries on contemporary authors. (pp. 77-78)

While Salmon acknowledges this inherent paradox, he goes no further than showing how James reluctantly accepted this invasion of a writer's privacy as a condition of celebrity. What he does not consider in his discussion of media practice at this time, is the possibility that James might actually use this device to his advantage, much as he may have appeared to reject it. Developments in media practice were also increasing the public's interest in the private lives of writers, and James's own involvement at this time can be viewed as a conscious decision to use it as a way of shaping his public image as a writer. Salmon observes that the 'technique of the interview [...] was one of the most innovative strategies of the so-called New Journalism which emerged in the 1880s and 1890s' (p. 108), one that was also increasingly applied to literary subjects. With the continuing popularity of the literary pilgrimage and the emergent technique of the interview, both of these trends evolved into a new investigative feature, as journalists 'began to conduct interviews with literary celebrities in their homes' (p. 108). Not only could literary pilgrims visit the homes of dead writers, they could now catch glimpses of living writers in their current domestic settings. Salmon notes that new monthly magazines, such as *The*

Idler and *The Strand*, included regular articles that featured 'the celebrity at home' interview (p. 109).

The 'writer at home' interview asserted his or her social status by exhibiting both the writer's home and his or her material possessions. No longer reduced to a collection of representative artefacts or relics, the living author and his or her material possessions could now be seen in correlation to one another. In addition to reflecting social status, these commodities were considered capable of offering an insight into the character of a literary figure, as Salmon indicates:

The aim of these enquiries, however, was not merely to confirm the exalted social status of the celebrity, but, rather, to suggest that material possessions were capable of offering a privileged insight into a unique 'personality'. The physical exploration of the home was mapped on to a narrative of biographical revelation. (p. 109)

By suggesting that both journalist and reader had privileged access to the life of the writer, the 'writer at home' interview served consequently to further confuse the boundaries between the public and private aspects of a writer's life. As Salmon explains, the 'scene of an author's labours' (p. 110) confused the boundaries between the private and the public. 'Privacy itself was thus reduced to a strategy of publicity; rather than offering a refuge from the public domain, the 'private life' of the author became the very sign of celebrity' (p. 110). Salmon recognises the contrasting ideas of 'public' against 'private' within the 'writer at home' interview, as well as the extent to which the writer's house contributed to the construction of authorial image at this time, but he does not consider in his study how James himself may have translated these oppositions more specifically into 'protection' and 'promotion' respectively, and used them to create a more complex approach to this issue through his writing. As I have argued, these contrasting perceptions are challenged in 'The Birthplace', suggesting that James's attitude to the literary pilgrimage and the symbol of the

writer's home should possibly not be interpreted as straightforward concession on his part. The 'writer at home' interview asserted exactly what James had critiqued in 'The Birthplace': that a writer's home and possessions do not and cannot offer any privileged access to his or her private life. As Andrea Zemgulys notes, James's 'The Birthplace' can be read as an example of the 'anti-tourism rhetoric of the day', reacting against the increasingly popular practice of the literary pilgrimage at this time.²³ She also remarks: 'By the turn of the twentieth century, it was clear even to James that, barring arson, much would be made of any famous writer's house'.²⁴ Between the seemingly 'anti-tourism rhetoric' of 'The Birthplace' and his personal interest in visiting writers' homes, James maintained a complex and contradictory position on the subject of the literary pilgrimage. Read literally, this story can be interpreted as a simple condemnation of such interest in the literary life and its domestic surroundings, but considered in relation to James's own presence in the media at this time (which Salmon does not observe), reveals a less straightforward engagement by James in this debate.

Although the didacticism on display in 'The Birthplace' can be read as a warning against the practice, he had repeatedly undertaken literary pilgrimages of his own (such as those previously noted to Stratford-upon-Avon and Tarrytown). In addition, the timing of James's acquisition of Lamb House was not accidental; the nature of the property and its intended use made it ideal for future use as a public space. Originally designed and built by the Mayor of Rye Mr Lamb, the Garden Room (later to be used by James as his writing room) had been designed as a public reception room.²⁵ Its original purpose as a public space contrasts with James's use for

²³ Andrea Zemgulys, 'Henry James in a Victorian crowd: *The Birthplace* in context', *Henry James Review*, 28.3 (2008), 245–256 (p. 245).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

²⁵ Booth, p. 225.

it as his private workroom. With its historical and local significance, James's choice of home would naturally encourage interest from members of the public, and would create exposure rather than seclusion for him as its new occupant: his decision to occupy Lamb House at this time can then be seen as a conscious act of public promotion at a time when 'successful writers had to establish a home worth visiting'.²⁶ Booth goes on to suggest that

He must have anticipated that there would be as much or more posthumous interest in his habits and habitation as there was in his lifetime [...] Lamb House was a strategy similar to the New York Edition, a decision to shape future reception.²⁷

Indeed in 1950, thirty-four years after James's death, Lamb House was purchased by the National Trust for the specific purpose of being opened to the public as a literary museum. During his lifetime, James had already begun to shape contemporary perceptions of himself as a writer, and Lamb House was part of the legacy left by him to shape his posthumous reception. Its literary heritage continued when, in 1918, the novelist (and friend of James) E. F. Benson took over the occupancy of Lamb House. What James had not anticipated, however, is the possibility that the image of the house — and of Lamb House in particular — could provoke such interest for future novelists as well as biographers and readers, or be so crucial to the fashioning of James's image by future generations. It is a continued interest that has helped to shape perceptions not just of James, but also the lives of others.

It is possible to see James playing with the contrasting perceptions of 'protection' and 'publicity' in his decision to give an interview for such a feature in 1904 — only a year after he critiqued the public fascination with invading the private space of writers' homes in 'The Birthplace'. He opened the doors of Lamb House to

²⁶ Booth, p. 217.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 223-24.

the journalist Sydney Brooks for an article entitled 'Mr. Henry James At Home', published in the American magazine *Harper's Weekly* in October 1904.²⁸ The first page of this two-page article (Figure 1) exposes both the author and his home to the reader's scrutiny.

²⁸ Sydney Brooks, 'Mr. Henry James at Home', *Harper's Weekly*, October 1904, pp. 1548-49. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

Mr. Henry James at Home

By Sydney Brooks

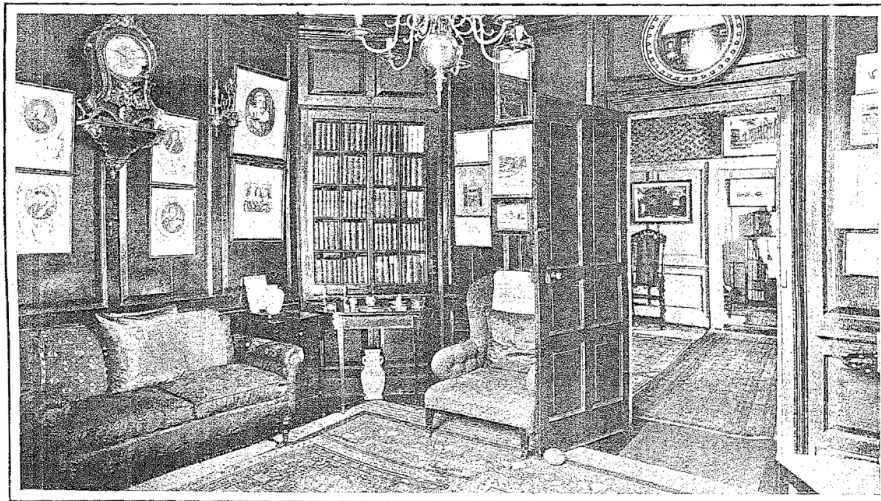
SEVENTY miles from London, on the sea-coast of Sussex, stands the ancient town of Rye. "Ancient" by royal prescription, for Rye is one of the Cinque Ports whose bounden duty it was to keep the narrow seas clear of pirates, French and Dutch. I know no quaintier townlet in all England. It has a history that goes back with scarcely a break for nearly nine hundred years, and no spiritless history either, but vibrant with handsome deeds by land and sea, great victories, and great disasters. Even now, for all its antique peacefulness, there is a whiff of old battles about the place and something more than a whiff in tower and bastion and huge battlemented gateway. A topsyturvy place, of narrow climbing streets and unexpected alleys, all rich in spoil for the antiquarian explorer, crowded with the sheer charm and delights of immemorial quietude. It is here, in this "port of stranded pride," which the sea has ungratefully abandoned, that Mr. Henry James has made his home, far enough away from the distractions and multitudinous juroads of London life. Here he can work and live in peace and possess himself. The last spot, on the whole, where one would expect to find an American entrenched; perhaps, therefore, the first where one would look for Mr. Henry James. No more un-American townlet, at any rate, exists in Great Britain. To go from it, as Mr. James has done, to America, must, one would think, be like laying down Matthew Arnold's poems to enter a power-house. There is no higher word to be spoken for Rye than this—that it is all a Jamesic would have it. And this, but with even more emphasis, is all that one can say of his more immediate surroundings. At the top of a twisting cobbled street and within a stone's throw of a six-hundred-year-old church, stands Lamb House, a



Mr. Henry James in the Garden of his Home at Rye

tawny-bricked early Georgian mansion, with the Demosthenic simplicity and spaciousness of its admirable period. It, too, like all things else in Rye, has its little bit of history. George I., returning from one of his too-frequent visits to Hanover, and compelled by a gale to put in at Rye, stayed there for a night—the very night that the Mrs. Lamb of the day chose to give birth to a son. The royal christening bowl that followed is still an heirloom in the Lamb family. The Jameses may best conceive the interior of the house by imagining it a combination of Staleybridge and Poynton, with all the eteteras that make a house—mouldings, doors, panels, balustrades, and so on—perfect in form and appositeness, and all the appointments, pictures, rugs, and furniture chosen and arranged with the assured instinct of an artist. "My humble possessions," says Mr. James of his Sheraton chairs, bookcases, tables, settees, and buffets, while the eye of the furniture-hunter grows covetous, taking in the cool, calm exquisiteness of it all.

Nor is the outside less pleasing and refreshing—the mint-sauce lawn and flowerbeds, the brick garden wall, the conservatories and the creeper-covered house. But it is to a little outbuilding on the right of the house and joined to it by a wall that, from the garden, one's eyes turn oftimes. It is the same building that topped the vista as one climbed up the stony street to the house. "The Banqueting Hall," says Mr. James, with a twinkle, apologizing for the name by a reference to the Georgian past. Put now, at any rate, to finer uses, for this one-roomed annex, white-panelled inside, is where Mr. James weaves and dictates his meticulous, incomparable tales. Altogether it will be odd if he finds anything in America during his present visit to remind him of his English home.



The Library at Lamb House, Mr. James's English Home

1548

Figure 1: Front page of 'Mr. Henry James at Home'.

The timing of the article's publication is significant, as it coincides with the lecture tour that James took across the United States to boost his literary career. Brooks refers explicitly to this trip twice in his article: 'To go from it, as Mr. James has done, to America' and 'in America during his present visit' (p. 1548) as a way of promoting James's tour to his American readers. His decision to agree to such an interview can therefore be seen as exactly the public act of self-promotion that he resisted endorsing in his fiction.

Brooks does not refer directly to James's fiction as a promotional tool. Rather, it is James's home that is used as a way of asserting his subject's status as a successful writer. His language is suitably flattering, noting as many prestigious landmarks and historical details about Rye as he can in his brief article: he is keen to point out that King George I stayed in Lamb House after being shipwrecked on nearby Camber Sands in 1726. Antiques, furniture and notable possessions are referred to throughout the article, and 'the ancient town of Rye' (p. 1548) is itself referred to as if it were an antique: Brooks describes it 'for all its antique peacefulness' and 'rich in spoil for the antiquarian explorer' (p. 1548). When Brooks begins to describe Lamb House, the property is regarded as equally prestigious:

At the top of a twisting cobbled street and within a stone's throw of a six-hundred-year-old church, stands Lamb House, a tawny-bricked early Georgian mansion, with the Demosthenic simplicity and spaciousness of its admirable period. (p. 1548)

James's home is, as Brooks illustrates, a house to be both admired and coveted, and as such is a symbol of his social and professional status. It is in Rye 'that Mr. Henry James has made his home, far enough from the distractions and multitudinous inroads of London life. Here he can work and live in peace and possess himself',

Brooks states (p. 1548). The scene of seclusion and privacy that Brooks creates for James contradicts the very exposure that his article intends to generate.

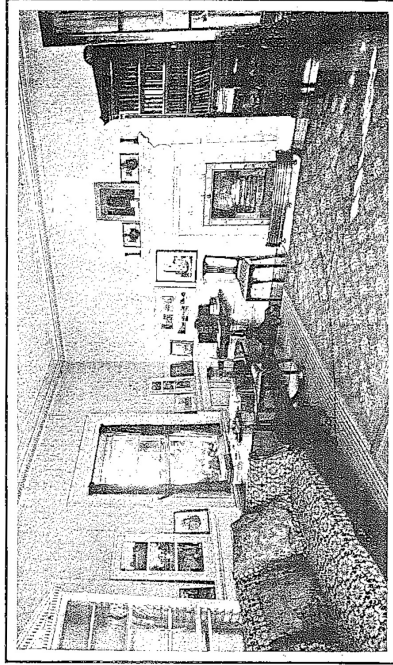
Brooks makes his solitary reference to James's writing when he invites his reader to imagine the writer's home: 'The Jamesite may best conceive the interior of the house by imagining it a combination of Staleybridge and Poynton, with all the etceteras that make a house' (p. 1548). Reading the author's life through his writing is a strategy that was, of course, repeatedly condemned by James himself; yet his interviewer does not acknowledge this contradiction in his own reading strategy. Brooks continues to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction when he briefly describes its interior, just as the narrator would describe those of Poynton or Waterbath in *The Spoils of Poynton*:

Mouldings, doors, panels, balustrades, and so on — perfect in form and appositeness, and all the appointments, pictures, rugs, and furniture chosen and arranged with the assured instinct of an artist. (p. 1548)

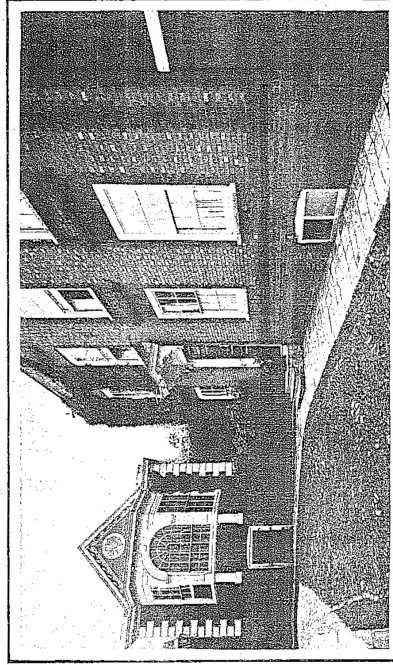
The influence that James's home and possessions have upon his image as a successful writer is illustrated by the photographs of both the exterior and interior of Lamb House that dominate the second of the two pages of Brooks's article (Figure 2). By emphasising the importance of the material possession, Brooks echoes the beliefs held by Mona Brigstock and Adela Gereth in *The Spoils of Poynton*, through whom material possessions are perceived as an indication of social and moral wealth. As the academic Stephanie Foote explains,

Social value and distinction can be read in relationship to consecrated goods. *Spoils* is furnished with characters whose complexity is nearly entirely dependent on their readings of how peoples' social motives can be correlated to their expression of taste.²⁹

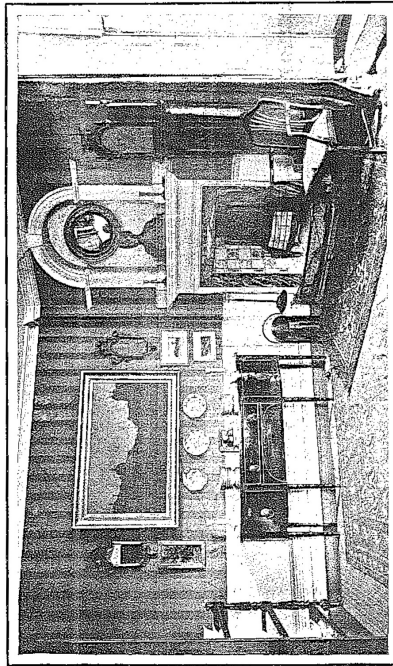
²⁹ Stephanie Foote, 'Henry James and the Parvenus: Reading Taste in *The Spoils of Poynton*', *Henry James Review*, 27.1 (2006), 42-60 (p. 42).



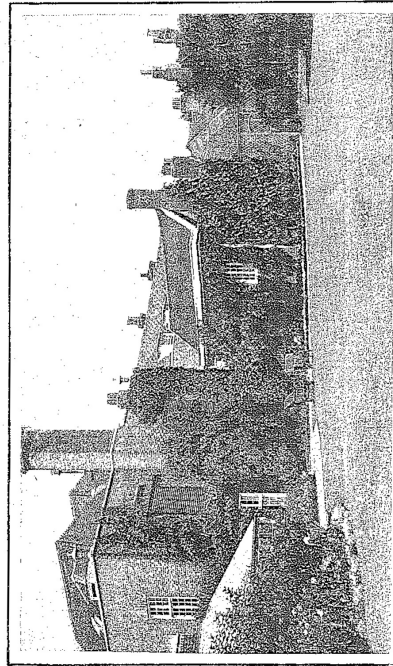
The Author's Writing-room at Lamb House



The Author seated on the Door-step of his Home in Sussex



The Dining-room at Lamb House



Lamb House from the Lawn—the Building to the Right is the Author's Writing-room

VIEWS OF "LAMB HOUSE," THE HOME OF HENRY JAMES, AT RYE, SUSSEX, ENGLAND

The reader is referred to the article by Sidney Brooks on the opposite page of this issue of the "Weekly" describing the English residence of Henry James. The distinguished author makes his home at Rye, a little town on the sea-coast, and, as noted in the "Weekly" at the time of his arrival, is now visiting America for the first time in a number of years

Figure 2: Second page of 'Mr. Henry James at Home'.

In 'Mr. Henry James at Home', however, the writer's expression of taste is used to amplify his professional success and position as a celebrity. James's own words are quoted only briefly in this article, but, in both instances, he refers to his possessions and his home respectively as public exhibits. In an attempt at modesty during the interview, he refers to 'My humble possessions' (p. 1548), which Brooks then goes on to describe in comparatively modest terms: 'Sheraton chairs, bookcases, tables, settees, and buffets, while the eye of the furniture-hunter grows covetous, taking in the cool, calm exquisiteness of it all' (p. 1548). The second quotation reflects the same discrepancy between modesty and exhibition that does more to promote than to underplay James's literary and social status. Brooks notes that James announces "'The Banqueting Hall [...] with a twinkle' (p. 1548), suggesting that James is fully aware of the status his home gives him.

Brooks repeatedly refers to 'Jamesites' (p. 1548) throughout his article; a term that does nothing to dispel the impression of Henry James as a celebrity or iconic figure. The word 'Jamesite' implies an admirer or follower, not unlike the pilgrims who visit the home of the poet in 'The Birthplace'. Through this publicity, as well as James's consent to be interviewed and his home be photographed for inclusion in the article, both Brooks and James are complicit in creating an image of James as a celebrity symbol or icon, and encourage Lamb House to be a future site for literary tourism. 'Mr. Henry James at Home' appears to be a conscious act of publicity that works against the messages delivered in his shorter fiction. 'The Birthplace' can also be seen as an ironic premonition of Lamb House being opened to the public as a museum during the 1950s, and James becoming the subject of public scrutiny, just like the unnamed poet of his tale. James's decision to write and publish 'The Birthplace' at the same time that he agreed to give the interview with Sydney Brooks is not simply testament to his own awareness of the significance of the writer's house

in the formation of the literary celebrity. On the surface, this irony appears to contradict the message that James offers through his fiction, and equally public efforts to promote his own celebrity through a demonstration of his material and social wealth in the media of the time. However, this inconsistency can alternatively be perceived as a conscious decision to confuse his authorial image for both his readers at the time, as well as for his 'postmortem exploiters'.³⁰

3.3 Tóibín, Lodge, and the Literary Pilgrimage

In 2003, exactly one hundred years after Henry James published 'The Birthplace,' David Lodge and Colm Tóibín, authors of their respective biographical novels *Author, Author* and *The Master*, undertook their own literary pilgrimages to Lamb House. Both writers have written about their experiences of visiting James's former home in essays entitled 'The Year of Henry James; or, Timing is All: the Story of a Novel' (Lodge: described in the introductory chapter),³¹ 'The Haunting of Lamb House' and 'A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James' (Tóibín).³²

In 'The Year of Henry James', Lodge notes the surge of interest in James and his life as the subject of fictional treatment in no fewer than five biographical novels published within a four year period. The beginning of the trend is marked by Emma Tennant's *Felony* (2002) which was followed by Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of*

³⁰ James, *The Letters of Henry James Volume 4*, p. 806.

³¹ David Lodge, 'A Year of Henry James; or, Timing is All: the Story of a Novel' in *The Year of Henry James; or, Timing Is All: the Story of a Novel* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006) pp. 03-103. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

³² Colm Tóibín, 'The Haunting of Lamb House' and 'A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James' in *All a Novelist Needs: Colm Tóibín on Henry James*, ed. by Susan M. Griffin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 18-23 and pp. 24-37. Further references are to these editions and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

Beauty (2004). Both *The Master* and *Author, Author* followed in 2004, and the last full-length novel, *The Typewriter's Tale* by Michiel Heyns, appeared in 2005, three years prior to Cynthia Ozick's short-story 'Dictation' in 2006. Of these five examples, Henry James appears as the principal character in only two: *The Master* and *Author, Author*. In *The Line of Beauty*, the central character writes a PhD thesis on the major themes of James's novels; in *Felony*, *A Typewriter's Tale*, and 'Dictation', the focus is placed on other characters, such as his friend Constance Fenimore Woolson and his (fictional) typist Frieda Wroth, and fellow writer and contemporary Joseph Conrad respectively. It is due to the use of James as a central character that this chapter will maintain a focus on *The Master* and *Author, Author*.

In 'The Year of Henry James' Lodge asks why it is that the biographical novel has become so popular in recent years and, more specifically, why Henry James has been repeatedly adopted as the subject for fictional treatment. He remarks:

On the face of it, this convergence of novelistic attention is a remarkable phenomenon [...] Something in the atmosphere — or, to use a more philosophical term, the zeitgeist? Needless to say I have given the question some thought myself, and have come to the conclusion that it was a coincidence waiting to happen.³³

Lodge goes on to suggest that developments in Queer Theory and Feminism towards the end of the twentieth century could account for the rising biographical interest in James's life.³⁴ However, these alone do not fully explain why a growing number of contemporary writers have made the transition from evidence-based documentary biography to the hybrid form of the biographical novel.

³³ Lodge, 'The Year of Henry James', p. 5.

³⁴ Some of the more recent examples of James biographies that address these questions include Lyndall Gordon's *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (1998) and Sheldon M. Novick's *Henry James: The Young Master* (2000).

In addition to Colm Tóibín and David Lodge, Michiel Heyns, author of *A Typewriter's Tale*, also published an essay in which he records the experience of writing his biographical novel on Henry James. 'The Curse of Henry James' appeared in the magazine *Prospect* in 2006, after its author repeatedly failed to secure a publisher for the novel in Britain. It is significant that Heyns, along with Lodge and Tóibín, has written about the experience of writing about writing, and it is a heightened sense of self-reflexivity that motivates each of these writers to produce their biographical novels.

In each of the three essays, Lodge, Tóibín and Heyns convey their individual experiences of writing their fictional portraits of Henry James. Another significant theme that unites them is their interest in Lamb House and their participation in the literary pilgrimage as preparation for writing their biographical novels. As all three essays illustrate, the idea of the home appears to be significant in relation to the creative process.

David Lodge acknowledges the significance of place (as a geographic location) in the process of writing *Author, Author*, when he lists a number of Jamesian homes and haunts visited as part of his preparatory research for the novel. Places with Jamesian connections include Leeds, Whitby, Torquay, Kensington and Hampstead in the United Kingdom, as well as cities further afield including Venice and Florence in Italy. It is the three visits that he makes to Lamb House during the preparatory stages of writing *Author, Author*, however, to which Lodge dedicates the greatest attention in his essay.

Tóibín also forges a close connection between domestic space and the writing process in both 'A More Elaborate Web' and 'The Haunting of Lamb House'. His developing interest in reading and writing about the work of Henry James during his teenage years is associated with memories of his childhood home, and his mother's

decision to redecorate the house at the same time. Tóibín explains how he began to read *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) for the first time 'in a strange room that had no clear, pure, direct association with childhood'.³⁵ Echoes of geographic and domestic place seen in Lodge's essay are once again proven to be of key importance to Tóibín. He writes: 'I knew now that I was going to begin the novel [...] close to places that James had known and loved' (p. 26) and goes on to mention Venice, Florence, and Rye. It is this visit to Rye, and more specifically Lamb House, that he details in his second essay, 'The Haunting of Lamb House.'

As the visits by Tóibín and Lodge reveal, James, who seemed to vilify the literary pilgrimage so vociferously in his lifetime would, a century later, remain such a popular subject of literary tourism. This continuing popularity proves, as Morris Gedge at the end of 'The Birthplace' and James's own self-promotion in the *Harper's Weekly* article demonstrate, that the image of the home remains central to the image of the artist as well as to the creative process. And, as Lodge and Tóibín show in their essays, the house (here Lamb House) and the process of re-enacting the literary pilgrimage are also strongly associated with their own experiences of writing. The emphasis that both Lodge and Tóibín place upon the biographical significance of the literary pilgrimage also seems surprising in this context. It is no longer a means through which one gains a deeper understanding of a text, but is now where writers go to learn more about their writing subjects and, in turn, about themselves. The extent to which both Lodge and Tóibín identify with other writers (both James and their contemporaries) when inside the house indicates how much the literary pilgrimage involves, for the contemporary writer, the blurring of boundaries between the 'self' and 'other.' James initially classes his own account of a visit to Shakespeare's birthplace as a 'portrait' of a place (collected under the title *Portraits of Places*), and

³⁵ Tóibín, 'A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James', p. 24.

the human quality that this description gives to the house also points to a greater focus on the human subject, and not the physical dwelling. The accounts that Lodge and Tóibín offer further sharpen this focus, revealing a concern with a projection of the self through this literary subject.

In 'The Year of Henry James,' Lamb House is the embodiment of literary success for the writer. Describing the last chapter in part three of *Author, Author*, Lodge explains how it

begins with Henry James lying awake in bed, this time in a happier mood, thinking back over the acquisition of Lamb House, which he now occupies, and looking forward confidently to the work he hopes to accomplish there. (p. 55)

Here the house signifies James's own personal reflection of his literary hopes and ambitions rather than any public projection of himself as an author figure.

In 'The Haunting of Lamb House,' Tóibín describes his pilgrimage through more spiritual imagery. He explains that: 'the house itself is full of the atmosphere of James' (p. 18), but goes on to indicate the purpose of his visit:

I now had what I was searching for — I walked one last time through the downstairs rooms of Lamb House, the house where James wrote all of his later masterpieces, the house where his old ghost, quiet and refined, and dedicated still perhaps to art at its most pure and life at its most complex, walks proudly now that his reputation as an artist continues to grow and his books are still being read. (pp. 19-20)

It is surprising to see how Tóibín describes James's ghostly presence in such literal terms, still confined within Lamb House, in the same way that the occupants of and visitors to the birthplace believed the house still contained something of the poet within its four walls. Lamb House, for Tóibín, not only embodies the idea of James as a spectral entity, but also a reflection of the author's literary success. The title of Tóibín's essay itself remains ambiguous in this context, suggesting either James's

ghost haunting the house, or implying Tóibín's own haunting presence within it. That both Lodge and Tóibín express individual beliefs that they can in some way feel closer to the spirit of Henry James by physically occupying his former home is not without irony, given the decidedly cynical tone of 'The Birthplace.' However, it remains an irony unacknowledged by either Lodge or Tóibín in either of their accounts. While both of these contemporary authors seem to be actively engaging in their quests to seek something of James's authorial spirit within Lamb House perhaps for creative inspiration, by becoming literary pilgrims themselves, both Tóibín and Lodge open up the prospect of exploring their own authorial identities. By doing so, they perpetuate the self-reflexivity that James also performed in the complex construction of his own authorial image. Lodge does refer to the extent to which James disapproved of biographical interest in his life, and how this reflects upon his decision to write the biographical novel. He remarks: 'It is a fair assumption that James would have anathematised novels about himself even more vehemently than biographies'.³⁶ In view of this statement, both Lodge's and Tóibín's biographical novels and literary pilgrimages reject the wishes and beliefs of their literary subject.

As Lodge's and Tóibín's accounts illustrate, Lamb House remains the location to which contemporary writers go to gain literary inspiration, in the same way that James sought his own literary inspiration from it a century earlier. In 'A Year of Henry James,' Lodge describes the effect of the publication of multiple James novels on one's impression of a biographical subject: 'When two novelists take the life of the same historical person or persons as their subject [...] the possibility of duplication is much more real' (p. 12). This image of doubling or multiplying of the author-figure is one that repeatedly appears in *Author, Author*. Lodge explains that the 'germ' or moment of conception of *Author, Author* was initially inspired by themes of

³⁶ Lodge, 'A Year of Henry James', p. 39.

doubling, collaboration and literary competition. His interest was first drawn by the friendship between James and his fellow writer George du Maurier, and James's involvement in 'the genesis of *Tribby*' (p. 20), George du Maurier's bestselling novel of the time.

Lodge further explores the theme of doubling when recounting the experience of another writer, Michiel Heyns, and an unexpected meeting between Heyns and Tóibín during their individual visits to Lamb House. Although Lodge is not directly involved in the incident, he provides Heyns's version, originally published in the essay 'The Curse of Henry James',³⁷ and in which Heyns writes:

On a summer afternoon, shortly before the completion of my novel, my agent and I made a pilgrimage to Lamb House, now a National Trust property. There we met Colm Tóibín, whose presence was the first ominous inkling either of us had of his intentions [...] Both of us made surreptitious notes, Tóibín's, it seems, enabling him to write the passage in his book in which Henry James, in his bedroom, can hear his young guest and the object of his adulation, Hendrik Andersen, undress in the adjoining guest room. My notes allowed me to recreate James dictating to his typist in the green room.³⁸

Heyns's account of his encounter with Tóibín creates both a mirroring of each other's actions within the scene, as well as a mirroring of James's voyeuristic practice as imagined by Tóibín in *The Master*. Both visiting writers make 'surreptitious notes' whilst watching each other, where Tóibín creates his own scene involving James also imagining someone else in his home.³⁹ Heyns's observation of Tóibín echoes the voyeuristic quality of Tóibín's own imagined scene in the novel which lies at the centre of this passage, where James is listening to and imagining Andersen. By framing this passage within his own experience of writing, Lodge creates a further

³⁷ Michiel Heyns, 'The Curse of Henry James', *Prospect*, 26 October 2004, pp. 66-69.

³⁸ Lodge, 'A Year of Henry James', p. 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

layer of voyeurism, and by describing two writers observing and imagining the other whilst imagining a third 'fictional' writer-figure, he also highlights the self-consciousness inherent in their contemporary literary pilgrimages. The author-figures in this scene are not simply doubled but tripled and quadrupled, as Lodge, Tóibín, Heyns and James all become reflected within images of each other. In trying to 'find' and create images of their subject James during visits to Lamb House, each writer produces projections of themselves and each other: James remains simply the catalyst or justification for their visits to Lamb House, but is no longer the focus. Unlike Morris Gedge, whose own development within the narrative is driven by a wish to 'find' the author in a simple mirroring between himself and the poet, the process of multiplication and proliferation in Lamb House creates the effect of a refracted literary mirror.

A similar pattern of reflection and refraction can be seen in Tóibín's version of the same meeting in Lamb House. Like Lodge and Heyns, Tóibín's decision to visit James's former home in Rye was driven by the need for literary inspiration in preparation for writing *The Master*. He writes of this encounter from his own perspective:

Suddenly, that day, as I stood staring at Woolson's fancy work, a voice called my name. It was a London literary agent whom I knew. She was with one of her clients. She asked me what I was doing in Lamb House. I said that I was writing a book about Henry James. "So is my client," she said. She introduced me to the man who was standing beside her. "Are you writing about this house?" the agent asked. I told her that I was. As I spoke, I noticed a neatly dressed man whom I presumed was American listening to us carefully, moving closer. "Did you say that you were writing books on James?" he asked, "Because so am I." He shook our hands cheerfully.

By this time a small crowd had gathered, marveling at the three writers pursuing the same goal.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Tóibín, 'The Haunting of Lamb House', p. 19.

Here Tóibín depicts a scene created by observers and the observed in a more voyeuristic representation of the meeting in Lamb House. He is looking at an object in the house when he is spotted by the literary agent and her client. The two writers themselves now become the spectacle within Lamb House, while at the same time still watching each other: it is no longer the furniture or decoration that the visitors are interested in viewing. When Heyns and Tóibín refer to mirrored acts of writing about James, they are observed once more by a fourth unnamed 'neatly dressed man' who is 'listening to [them] carefully, moving closer'. As the crowd gather to view the growing group of writers 'pursuing the same goal', it is they who become the focus of interest: once again Henry James is no longer the focus but merely provides the impetus for their presence within the house.

While 'The Haunting of Lamb House' documents Tóibín's literary pilgrimage, 'A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James' reflects a broader experience of writing *The Master*. Suggestively entitled, the word 'becoming' implies both admiration for the writer as well as a process of transformation into his subject. Tóibín admits to a shared anxiety of authorship when he describes his own experience of not winning the Man Booker Prize for *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) five years before the publication of *The Master*. He explains how this experience helped him to understand James's own professional disappointments: 'The intensity with which I could handle James's failure in the theatre might have been greatly assisted by an event that occurred to me four months before I began to write the opening chapter of my book, although I did not realise this until later' (p. 30). When Tóibín goes on to describe his disappointment at not winning the Man Booker Prize, the subject of the second-person narration subtly shifts:

Within an instant, the lights are turned off and the cameras are packed up and no one is looking at you. You feel a strange guilt and shame. You

wish you were at home. Alone. But now you have to brave the night, speak to your publishers, accept the commiserations, smile. You are an outsider in London and you wish you were sitting in lamplight with a fire lighting and the servants all asleep, and you leafing through Flaubert's letters. (p. 30)

As the passage progresses, the identity of the 'you' described becomes increasingly unclear as the setting moves from a media- and light-filled Man Booker Prize hall of the late twentieth century, to the contrastingly dark, solitary location of a nineteenth-century home. In this short passage, Tóibín manages to transgress time, place and identity, as the subject depicted at the end is not himself; the lamplight, fire, servants and Flaubert's letters all suggest that he is instead imagining *being* Henry James. The image of the writer and the place of sanctuary is once more located in the domestic: 'you wish you were at home', Tóibín emphasises. Later in the essay, he comments that he 'was like James himself, sitting at home writing a book' (p. 32). While he cannot imagine James's consciousness, Tóibín's accounts vividly enact his desire to imagine that of his subject. In the process of attempting this, Tóibín's image of himself as a writer is created in James's likeness.

David Lodge describes a similar process of imagining his own identity as an author in relation to his literary subject, this time during one of his documented visits to Lamb House. He fetishises James's bedroom, in the way that the pilgrims fetishise the rooms of 'The Birthplace'. It is, as mentioned in his essay, an experience that Lodge undertakes more than once during the preparatory period for writing *Author, Author*. The first brief reference to this is made towards the beginning of his essay: 'I had been in Lamb House — and indeed slept in Henry James's bedroom — three years earlier, when *Author, Author* was just a gleam in my eye, so to speak'.⁴¹ A few

⁴¹ Lodge, 'A Year of Henry James', p. 18.

pages on, however, the 'irresistible' (p. 26) prospect of sleeping in James's room, is given greater attention:

And so to bed — in Henry James's bedroom! [...] I had no idea that a few years later I would write a scene in which Henry James, waking early in this room, and lying contentedly in bed, as the rising sun peeps between the gap in his curtains, thinks back over his recent acquisition, and looks forward to the work he hopes to accomplish there. (p. 27)

As Lodge invites his reader to imagine him lying in James's bed, he too is imagining James lying in bed foreseeing his success as a writer. The experience that Lodge describes above occurred years before he began work on *Author, Author*, but we can see here how he already connects James's anticipated professional success with his own future literary project. What begins with an account of Lodge writing about himself becomes a frame within which he begins instead to imagine James thinking about writing, and in the process, confuses the boundaries between the self and the subject. The twenty-first century literary pilgrimage — as Tóibín and Lodge's experiences reveal — shifts the emphasis from a connection between authorial image and personal possessions, to the relationship that exists between author-figures as they appear within the writer's home. The manner in which Tóibín and Lodge reveal and conceal themselves and their literary subject during the research for their biographical novels (they 'look' for James in Lamb House, but discover a multiplication of author-figures) echoes the same trope of revelation and concealment evident in James's own writing on the literary pilgrimage: it is the human, rather than the material object, that has now become the focus of this search.

3.4 James's Uncanny House

The characteristic tropes of Sigmund Freud's theory of 'The Uncanny' (1919) are played out in the accounts by Tóibín, Lodge (as well as Heyns) and their visits to Lamb House.⁴² To summarise the key characteristics of his theory, Freud describes; 'what is known of old and long familiar' (p. 220); a 'doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self' (p. 234); notes how 'the distinction between reality and imagination is effaced' (p. 244) as well as an inherent 'repetition of the same features or character traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations' (p. 234). Each of these tropes is evident in the accounts of each of the three writers: following in the footsteps of the famous writer Henry James by visiting his former home; the multiplication of writer figures discovered also embarked upon the same task; and the shared experiences with both their subject James as well as their fellow writers. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, by writing about their literary subject, Tóibín and Lodge both become the subjects of their own uncanny narratives.

It is, after all, from the idea of the home that Freud's theory of the uncanny is derived. Of the numerous definitions offered for the word 'heimlich', Freud notes its meaning as 'homely' and '(of a house) haunted' (p. 220), as well as 'belonging to a house' (p. 222). What constitutes the difference between 'heimlich' (homely) and 'unheimlich' (unhomely) becomes a key consideration of Freud's study. Taken on even a literal level, Lodge and Tóibín both inevitably fall into the pattern outlined by Freud in 'The Uncanny', in which the home becomes the physical site of such uncanny experiences. That these experiences are echoed through the novelists'

⁴² Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: "An Infantile Neurosis" and Other Works Volume 17: 1917-1919*, ed. by James Strachey, trans. by Strachey ([1919] London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 217-256. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

accounts merely serves to increase the uncanniness inherent in their literary pilgrimages.

Rather than being the spaces in which writers and readers go to learn about their literary subject, it is instead within the house that the focus is flipped back upon the visitor. The examples of Lodge and Tóibín perpetuate exactly what Morris Gedge describes in his closing monologue of 'The Birthplace' one century earlier. It is also this process of inversion that, according to Hélène Cixous in her reading of 'The Uncanny' claims to be at the heart of Freud's theory.

It is in Hélène Cixous's poststructuralist reading of Freud's 'The Uncanny' that particular similarities can be identified between Freud's theory and the experiences of Tóibín and Lodge during their visits to Lamb House. Just as Freud highlights the distinction between literature and aesthetics, Cixous also outlines from the start of her essay 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "Uncanny")'⁴³ that it is 'meant as a reading divided between literature and psychoanalysis' (p. 525). Despite this interdisciplinary approach, it is the role of the novelist that she identifies in Freud that remains of primary interest in this chapter, and which offers the greatest parallels alongside both Tóibín and Lodge in their capacity as writers. Cixous describes how Freud's essay 'may strike us to be less a discourse than a strange theoretical novel' (p. 525); as a novelist, Freud is also 'caught off guard' (p. 525) by his own theory. According to Cixous's comparison, Freud is not a psychoanalyst but a novelist, 'The Uncanny' not a scientific study but a work of literature. Considered in this context, both Freud and his theory can be seen to negotiate a space between fiction and reality more than its author acknowledges in the essay. It is also because of this negotiation between fiction and reality that such

⁴³ Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "Uncanny")', *New Literary History*, 7.3 (1976), pp. 525-48. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

close connections can be drawn between Freud's theory of the uncanny and the biographical novel. When viewed in the context of authorship, as Cixous introduces in the case of Freud as the author of 'The Uncanny', this compulsion for reflexivity can be read as another example of the assertion (rather than rejection) of the author-figure.

If, as Cixous suggests, Freud adopts the role of the novelist in recounting his theory of the uncanny, then his reading of E.T.A Hoffmann's story 'The Sandman' (1816) can therefore be viewed as an example of an author writing about another author. Cixous observes how the tale of the sandman is not so much summarised and analysed but redrafted by Freud: 'one sees how he rewrites the tale for demonstrative purpose [...] The two versions of the Sand-Man have to be read in order to notice what has been slipped into one version from another' (p. 533). Through this process of rewriting Hoffmann's story, Freud becomes caught in a *mise en abyme* of his own construction. What he regards as an abridgement of this story actually becomes Hoffmann's fictional double; Freud then becomes Hoffmann's authorial double. Although Freud refers to his description of Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' as merely 'a short summary',⁴⁴ it in fact runs to five pages of Freud's essay. In this outline, Freud adopts Hoffmann's role when he recounts the original narrative; an exercise that repeats Hoffmann's words but is interpreted from Freud's perspective rather than directing his reader back to the original text. While Freud is confident that: 'This short summary leaves no doubt, I think, that the feeling of something uncanny is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man' (p. 230) — elsewhere in his essay he attributes the task of offering the definitive reading of a particular text to the 'imaginative writer' (p. 249):

⁴⁴ Freud, p. 230.

[He] has this license among many others, that he can select his world of representation so that it either coincides with the realities we are familiar with or departs from them in what particulars he pleases. We accept his ruling in every case. (p. 249)

The reader of 'The Uncanny' is then left to follow Freud's own advice when he or she accepts his interpretation and rewriting of Hoffmann's story. By assuming the role of the novelist's double as another 'imaginative writer' in this manner, Freud draws the focus of his essay back to himself. As Cixous also argues:

"Better than anyone else," says Freud, it is the writer who consents to give birth to the *Unheimliche*. The writer is also what Freud wants to be. Freud sees in himself the writer, the one whom the analyst must question concerning the literature which psychoanalysis must understand in order to know itself.⁴⁵

As indicated by Cixous, Freud continues this process of inversion (becoming both the analyst and the analysed) when he introduces a number of autobiographical tales to demonstrate manifestations of the uncanny that can occur in real life. He describes the feeling of déjà vu when lost in a 'provincial town in Italy' (p. 237); the habitual appearance of the number 62 on objects throughout a single day (pp. 237-38); and discovering that his companion in a railway carriage was in fact his own reflection (p. 248). It is Freud's decision to write about his own experiences rather than the nature of these experiences that is of particular interest here.

Cixous highlights the contradictions that exist between Freud's autobiographical anecdotes and his claim that: 'fiction presents more opportunities for creating uncanny feelings than are possible in real life' (p. 251). Freud's examples disprove his own theory, and it is within this conflict that Freud becomes trapped for a second time in his role as an author, in a net of his own creation. Tóibín and Lodge perpetuate this pattern during their visits to Lamb House, as the focus returns to

⁴⁵ Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms', p. 532.

themselves as the unwitting focus of their own investigations. Lamb House now becomes a trap (of their own construction) within which these contemporary writers catch themselves, just as Freud catches himself in his own definition of the uncanny.

As Cixous explains of Freud's account:

Everything takes place as if the *Unheimliche* went back to Freud himself in a vicious interchange between pursued and pursuer; as if one of Freud's repressions acted as the motor re-presenting at each moment the analysis of the repetition which Freud was analyzing: the *Unheimliche* is at the root of Freud's analysis.⁴⁶

What is therefore the uncanniest example is Freud's own essay, in which he confuses and is confused by his own theory:

An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises, and so on.⁴⁷

As 'The Uncanny' reveals, Freud becomes the victim of the theory that he formulates in this essay. He dupes the reader into believing that the most uncanny sensations are created by fiction, but then shows that they do in fact appear (and quite vividly so) in reality, as his autobiographical tales show. Once again, we witness the confusion of the boundaries between biography, autobiography and fiction, characteristic of modernist life-writers, at play in Freud's essay. The same effect is created by Tóibín and Lodge, when the preparatory research for their respective biographical novels (already inherently a confusion of imagination and reality) is confused further by the introduction of their own uncanny autobiographical experiences.

⁴⁶ Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms', p. 526.

⁴⁷ Freud, p. 244.

Tóibín and Lodge reveal a compulsion to write themselves into their narratives about James; while they seek to discover and write about their author-subject, their practices always expose something of their own role in the process — a way of denying the separation between themselves as authors and the texts that they create. At a fundamental level, this self-reflexivity to a degree restores the humanist ideal: that human agency is relevant to the interpretation of a text. Regardless of how hard they attempt to maintain a focus on their chosen author-subjects, these contemporary biographical novelists always inevitably return to a process of self-portraiture.

With Lamb House playing such a prominent role for both Tóibín and Lodge in the preparatory stages of writing *The Master* and *Author, Author*, it is no coincidence that James's home in Rye also features just as prominently in the novels themselves. Although both Tóibín and Lodge choose to focus on different periods in their subject's life, both writers portray this as a significant moment in his literary career; a moment that impacted upon his own as well as other peoples' perceptions of himself as an author-figure. While James's move to Lamb House appears as a pivotal moment at the centre of *The Master*, the same event features as a climactic point in Lodge's *Author, Author*. I shall consider how these two novelists treat this formative period of their subjects' career in different ways in the respective novels, and how the different treatments shape the representations of Henry James.

As the first part of this chapter has illustrated, Lamb House as a physical space was (and continues to be) instrumental in the construction of James's image as an author. It was at the time of his move to Rye that he wished to make a name for himself in the literary world; *The Master* ends with James installed in Lamb House ready to compose his three major novels (*The Wings of The Dove* (1902), *The*

Ambassadors (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904)), while *Author, Author* charts his attempts to achieve success as a dramatist.

Both Tóibín's and Lodge's accounts of their visits to Lamb House show how the writer's house performs a complex role in the creative process — not just for their literary subject but also for themselves — when writing about James. Virginia Woolf's letter to Violet Dickinson on her meeting with James in Rye; Morris Gedge in 'The Birthplace'; and Woolf's own visits to writers' homes all exemplify how the literary pilgrimage in some sense always reflects back upon the visitor, as much as (if not more so than) the literary subject whose house is being visited. In Tóibín and Lodge's pilgrimages, Lamb House becomes a space in which someone other than James is exposed: we see the house function as a hall of mirrors, reflecting both the author-biographer, their subject, and other author-figures. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will focus on the transition that is made by Tóibín and Lodge writing about their visits to James's home, to the manner in which the house finds expression in the biographical novels; namely, how they then figure their fictional Jameses through this domestic space.

3.5 Lamb House in *The Master* and *Author, Author*

In *The Master* and *Author, Author*, Tóibín and Lodge refer specifically to the watercolour picture of Lamb House painted by James's friend the architect Edward Warren. In both cases, it is this painting that first draws James's interest in the building. In *The Master*, the connections between the house and James's writing are

evident. Tóibín explains that James's writing at the time had influenced his desire for the future home:

In these years he had written so much, and in so much dramatic detail, about houses, that his friend the architect Edward Warren offered to make him drawings of Gardencourt or Poynton, Easthead or Bounds, houses he had described room by room, full of carefully created atmosphere, treasured ornament and faded tapestry.⁴⁸

The fictional houses of James's novels (including *The Portrait of a Lady's* Gardencourt; *The Spoils of Poynton's* Poynton Hall and Bounds House of *The Other House* (1896)) are treated in the same way as the real Lamb House in Rye, which consequently confuse the boundaries between fiction and reality. Each example is translated into an artistic impression rendered in watercolour by Edward Warren and, in this sense, all enter the realm of the imaginary.

Tóibín offers the first glimpse of the painting in his novel: 'Henry, each time he visited Warren's house, studied a drawing he had made of the garden room at Lamb House in Rye, viewed from the street, admiring the English essences, old brick and the sense of weathered comfort' (p. 128). The view presented here in the novel is displayed through several pairs of eyes, just as Tóibín's own visit to Lamb House is shown from multiple perspectives. The house is first rendered through Warren's painting, which is then interpreted through James's eyes before being presented to the reader here in the novel. This series of impressions pulls the house increasingly into the realm of the fictional, as it is portrayed here as an artistic interpretation of the real house. Tóibín goes on to describe the house in more detail as: 'a house both modest and grand, both central and secluded, the sort of house which seemed to belong so comfortably and naturally to others and to be inhabited so warmly and fruitfully by

⁴⁸ Tóibín, *The Master*, (London: Picador, 2004), p. 128. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

them' (p. 130). This second description of the house once again displays contradictory qualities; at once 'both modest and grand, both central and secluded'. Tóibín's reference to the house as 'belong[ing] so comfortably and naturally to others' continues this sense of plurality by introducing the ideas of both multiple ownership and occupancy.

Similarly, in *Author, Author*, Lodge also describes James's attraction to Lamb House as 'a solid, honest English gentleman's residence [...] It was an immensely attractive house, and he coveted it instantly' (p. 318). James immediately connects the possible identity of the owner with his own desire to acquire the house. Not only is James forming an image of this house from Warren's artistic impression, he is also manufacturing his own image as the 'English gentleman' at the same time. Lodge describes James's first viewing of Warren's painting:

A pencil-and-wash picture of a curious old building, recently executed and displayed on the wall of the sitting room, particularly caught Henry's eye. The building was of red brick with stone detailing, and had a large handsome bow-fronted window on the first floor, but a humble wooden door at ground level such as one might see on a stable or barn. (p. 314)

Lodge highlights both the painting's 'recent' composition and its purpose as an exhibit displayed within the home of his friend Edward Warren. His description of the painting, like Tóibín's, also exposes the contradictions offered by the house (it is at once 'handsome' as well as 'humble') which simultaneously reveals the opposing qualities of modesty and exuberance also exhibited in Sydney Brooks's *Harper's Weekly* article of 1904.

From the very first glimpses of Lamb House that both Tóibín and Lodge present in their novels, they each provide indications of how the house will be used as a device through which their images of James will be conceived. Concerned with

aesthetics and artistic impressions, multiple and contradictory viewpoints filtered through numerous lenses (both visual and literary) offer an introduction to the house as providing an ideological framework upon which to build their individual images of James.

Henry James wrote about his own impressions of Lamb House shortly after signing its lease in the autumn of 1897, but before he fully occupied the property the following spring. In October of that year he wrote in a letter to his friend Arthur C. Benson that: 'It is really good enough to be a kind of little becoming, high-door'd, brass-knocker'd *façade* to one's life'.⁴⁹ Not only does James's brief description address concerns regarding the aesthetics of his domestic environment ('little becoming'), he also connects this aesthetic preoccupation with that of his public literary reputation when he refers to the house as providing a '*façade*'. The ambiguity of the word 'becoming' implies both the house's aesthetic value, as well as a sense of development or transformation into something else. Tóibín adopts the same terminology in the title of his essay 'A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James', in which he conjures a combined sense of both admiration for and transformation into his literary subject. Specific references to the 'high-door'd, brass-knocker'd *façade*' imply that access to the property is controlled by its occupant, rather than being a space purposely left open to public scrutiny. While James invites Benson to visit him in Lamb House in this letter, these images of the lock and the secured entrance indicate the extent to which James might have wished to control access to his dwelling — and by extension to his self-constructed public image as an author. The inconsistency in James's invitation to Benson and the simultaneous sense of his wish to control access to his property provides another example of the complex

⁴⁹ Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James: Volume 2* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 243.

and contradictory stance that James displays when maintaining the privacy of the writer's home, as outlined in the previously discussed *Harper's Weekly* article, 'Mr Henry James at Home'. Images of both the door and the knocker also provide a transition from the exterior of the house as presented by Edward Warren's watercolour to its interior, as though transgressing the threshold of the property.

It is through this negotiation of *inside* and *outside* that both Tóibín and Lodge provide more detailed impressions of James's new home in their novels; a viewpoint also used to reflect a more detailed and complex impression of his character. Tóibín explains the significance of Lamb House for his Henry James:

For so many years now, he had no country, no family, no establishment of his own, merely a flat in London where he worked. He did not have the necessary shell, and his exposure over the years had left him nervous and exhausted and fearful. It was as though he lived a life which lacked a façade, a stretch of frontage to protect him from the world. Lamb House would offer him beautiful old windows from which to view the outside; the outside, in turn, could peer in only at his invitation.⁵⁰

Tóibín describes James here as belonging to Lamb House, rather than Lamb House belonging to James. The connection provides him with a sense of identity that he previously lacked, having left his native United States decades earlier to settle in Europe. In this passage the house serves not simply as a home, but as a form of protection for the vulnerable writer, without which he is 'nervous and exhausted and fearful'. The choice of words used to describe the house's protective qualities; 'shell', 'façade', and 'frontage' all imply not only a physical barrier but also a visual screen behind which James can conceal himself — such as a watercolour painting. The 'beautiful old windows' specifically referred to here by Tóibín express both a continued concern with the aesthetic value of the house, as well as their function as a

⁵⁰ Tóibín, *The Master*, p. 130.

two-way projection. This idea of the 'shell' or 'façade' (echoing James's own use of the same words in his letter to A.C. Benson) teases out the difference between the interior and exterior of the building, and between the perceptions of the private against the public. To the outside world, Lamb House becomes for James a physical barrier behind which he can retreat. From the outside, it functions as a screen upon which he can project public images of his authorial self, whilst at the same time protecting himself from the public wishing to look back in.

This sense of seclusion provides another source of contradiction, when Tóibín describes it in terms that alternate between entrapment and protection. He writes: 'Soon, however, his contented solitude could turn to loneliness. On grey, blustery days, in the first long winter, his study in Lamb House, and indeed the house itself, could seem like a cage' (p. 210). Elsewhere in the novel, the solitude offered by the physicality of the house conversely offers a sense of security: 'as he took his stroll in the garden, he would enjoy being protected from the world by the high garden walls of Lamb House' (p. 210). In *Author, Author*, David Lodge selects a different kind of imagery through which he associates James with his newly-acquired home. Here the protective image of stable bricks and mortar used in *The Master* is replaced with one of a ship on the sea:

He sometimes figured Lamb House as a ship of which he was the captain, steaming into the future, with MacAlpine as first officer and his little band of servants as crew; his bedroom was his cabin, the lawn was the main deck, and the Garden Room the bridge. Somewhere ahead a great project awaited him: three major novels, as analytical, introspective and deliberately paced as he cared to make them, but also as deep, as daring and beautiful as only he *could* make them.⁵¹

⁵¹ Lodge, *Author, Author*, p. 348 (original emphasis).

The use of nautical imagery here provides a connection to both the past and the future of Lamb House. The story of King George I being shipwrecked on nearby Camber Sands and his subsequent shelter in the house that night is one that Lodge recounts in 'The Year of Henry James' and again in *Author, Author* (p. 342). In this quote from *Author, Author*, the bedroom is imaginatively transformed into the 'cabin', or the heart of the vessel. The lawn becomes the 'deck' which provides a platform or cover for the house, but it is the Garden Room rendered here as the 'bridge' or control room that is most significant. Serving as his writing room, it is from the Garden Room of Lamb House that James is said to oversee and control his surroundings in his role as an author. Lodge presents James as captain 'steaming into the future', but it is not only the 'three major novels' that lie ahead; Lodge at the same time hints here at his own future visit to Lamb House nearly a century later, during which he occupies James's bedroom. James, his amanuensis, and the servants of Lamb House also play their roles in this depiction of Lamb House as captain, first officer and crew respectively, just as the actors of *Guy Domville* all play their parts on the ill-fated opening night of James's play. Lodge reveals James to exercise the same degree of introspection into and analysis of his own self-perception as he applies to his fiction, by constructing a public projection of his image as an author as overtly as he constructs any of his novels. From this passage, Lodge implies that James is just as careful when plotting his own life as he is about creating his art. It also succeeds in drawing closer connections between the role of the theatre and the function of the house in *Author, Author*. The motif of christening also mentioned here by Lodge alludes to the history of Lamb House, and the birth of the mayor's son on the same night that King George I sought refuge in the house. More pertinently, however, it

also hints strongly at James's rebirth as the image of a successful writer following his relocation to Lamb House.

By comparing their portrayals of Lamb House, it is possible to see how both Tóibín and Lodge use their impressions of the house as filters through which to figure their fictional representations of Henry James. The relationship between Tóibín's Lamb House and its occupant reveals a wider concern with the interior life of his writing subject situated in his surroundings, as he presents James locked inside but looking outwards from his home. This James is a solitary figure, withdrawn from the rest of the world. As Michael Wood remarks in his review of *The Master*, Tóibín's James 'protected himself, for the sake of his writing, from much of what other people call life',⁵² and who 'retreated into the locked room of himself'.⁵³ The motifs and imagery adopted by both Tóibín and Lodge in the accounts of their visits to Lamb House are reintroduced when describing the relationship between Henry James and his property in *The Master* and *Author, Author*. Using the analogy of James's home as a 'shell' or 'façade' behind which to both conceal himself and view his surroundings, Tóibín conjures the voyeuristic elements that also appear in 'The Haunting of Lamb House' when referring to other author-figures occupied within the house. The scene in which Tóibín watches the other writers, and in turn is watched by them, is translated in this novel into James concealed in his home alone, looking out through its windows onto the outside world. Conversely, Lodge's James performs his role for the benefit of an audience: the 'captain' of the ship, who is joined by his 'crew': the domestic staff. Lodge's James is not as isolated as Tóibín's, but his own sense of identity is dependent upon those around him. As Kathryn Kramer observes, 'Lodge's

⁵² Michael Wood, 'What Henry Didn't Do', *London Review of Books*, 18 March 2004 <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n06/print/wood01_.html> [accessed 12 September 2009] (para. 11 of 11).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, para. 10 of 11.

James consequently seems the most companioned of all', even if this company compromises James's sense of authorial identity.⁵⁴ The James presented in *Author, Author* is engaged more with outward perceptions of his own image. While *The Master* is concerned with the internal experience of the writer, *Author, Author* addresses the issue of James's public and private reputation as an author. In the case of both novels, the respective portraits of James are dependent on *other* writer-figures, just as the 'James' sought in the twenty-first century literary pilgrimages are figured as and in relation to these contemporary authors.

3.6 Tóibín, Lodge and James in the House of Fiction

The image of Henry James concealed behind the 'shell' or 'façade' of Lamb House is used by Tóibín not only to describe the practical function that James's home provides for his subject, but also the image of James standing inside whilst looking out is adopted in this novel as an analogy for his presence in the world. Tóibín once again describes his version of James in relation to his detachment from the rest of the world: he is 'a man away from his own country, observing the world as a mere watcher from a window'.⁵⁵ In his review of *The Master*, Peter Kemp describes Tóibín's James as 'a genius of watchfulness';⁵⁶ John Updike remarks that Tóibín's subject is 'the inward James, the Master of literary creation and a vast hushed arena of dreams and memories and hoarded observations — a triumphantly inert

⁵⁴ Kathryn Kramer, 'The Secrets of the Master', *Henry James Review* 29.2 (2008) pp. 197-207 (p. 203).

⁵⁵ Tóibín, *The Master*, p. 47.

⁵⁶ Peter Kemp, 'Author, Author by David Lodge', *Times Online*, (29 Aug 2004) <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article474003.eke> [accessed 11 September 2009] (para. 1 of 7).

protagonist. Outwardly, he is mute'.⁵⁷ The Henry James depicted in Tóibín's novel prefers to watch people rather than interact with them; his character observes life around him, standing inside and looking out through the windows of Lamb House. Henry James describes the process of literary composition in his preface to the New York Edition of *Portrait of a Lady*, (written and published in 1908), in which he draws upon the importance of the author's domestic surroundings and its impact upon the process of composition. He begins this essay by describing the rooms in which he began writing this particular novel, a technique adopted by Tóibín in 'A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James'. It is in this preface that he also draws a comparison between the characteristics of the house and the experience of the author, when he writes of the 'house of fiction':

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million — a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find.⁵⁸

James's 'house of fiction' is characterised by the 'number of possible windows' viewed by the 'individual vision and [...] individual will.' The many different and possible ways in which a scene can be perceived by the subjective observer are represented by the multiple windows that adorn the house. James says of these windows:

They have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and

⁵⁷ John Updike, 'Silent Master', *New Yorker* (28 June 2004) <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/06/28/040628crbo_books> [accessed 12 September 2009] (para. 3 of 7).

⁵⁸ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* ([1881] London: Penguin, 1973), p. ix.

again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine.⁵⁹

In *The Master*, Tóibín provides James with a literal space in which he can create his 'house of fiction'; namely his beloved Lamb House in Rye. Crucial to this image of the house is the artist James, whose presence within the house itself determines the process of literary creativity as well as the manifestation of his individual perception. In his preface, James asserts the importance of the author when he writes: 'the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form"; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher-without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist.'⁶⁰ We see Tóibín's James installed within Lamb House, observing the world like the figure he describes in his preface. References to windows, and descriptions of James standing by or looking through windows and doors, are a recurrent motif in *The Master*. The novel contains numerous images of James looking out of, looking back into, and moving towards the windows of the many houses he is depicted in.⁶¹ James becomes the figure standing 'with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass' looking out onto the world around him.

⁵⁹ James, *Portrait of a Lady*, p. ix.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁶¹ Some examples of the repeated motif of Henry James and the window follow in the ensuing (inexhaustive) list from *The Master*: 'He had stood in the beautiful city on a small street in the dusk, gazing upwards, waiting, watching, for the lighting of a lamp in the window' (p. 10); 'He realized now that this was something he had described in his books over and over, figures seen from a window or a doorway' (p. 34); 'Henry carried the photographs to the window to study them in a better light' (p. 154); 'In the mornings he sat at the wide south window of the drawing room' (p. 222); 'He drank the tea when it was brought, and then he went to the window and frantically studied the street outside' (p. 253); 'They found him standing at the window' (p. 253); 'Each time the Benedicts left the apartment he went to the window and watched them as they stepped into the gondola' (p. 261); 'Henry stood up and went to the window, forcing William to turn as he spoke' (p. 336).

Tóibín's essay 'The Haunting of Lamb House' echoes James's preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* in its description of the creative process behind the composition of a novel. It is also in this essay that Tóibín displays the same preoccupation with the imagery of the house, and its role in the creative process as first utilised by James in his preface. Describing the interior of the house, Tóibín writes: 'The imagination is a set of haunted, half-lit rooms. Sometimes we have no idea ourselves why a novel begins, why a style takes root, or a plot grows'.⁶² We also see Tóibín wandering through the rooms of Lamb House during his own visit, capturing images as he gathers ideas for his novel. During this visit, however, we see an inversion of James's 'house of fiction' become manifest within the house itself. James's analogy is put into practice when Tóibín encounters the other writers inside the house, all engaged in the same process of gathering images in preparation for their respective writing. Here Tóibín, Heyns and the unnamed writer each become a 'figure with a different pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass', as the windows or apertures are turned back inwards upon each of the other writers and, in turn, upon themselves. When looking back within the house, the 'house of fiction' reveals the image of the artist himself, albeit refracted through its multiple and differing apertures to show the multiple artist figures. Once again, we see Tóibín's quest to 'find' the author Henry James turned back on himself, just as Sigmund Freud's description of the uncanny returns to his own feelings and experiences on the subject.

From the beginning of *The Master*, Tóibín's James is presented as a figure haunted by ghosts from his past. In the opening scene of the novel James wakes from a dream in which he is 'visited' by his dead mother and sister; but also described in this passage is another unnamed figure. While this dream sequence brings back

⁶² Tóibín, 'The Haunting of Lamb House', pp. 21-22.

images of the past it also conjures snapshots of the future and, more specifically, the idea of Tóibín following in James's footsteps one hundred years on. Echoing an account he gives in his essay 'A More Elaborate Web: Becoming Henry James', in *The Master* Tóibín describes a dream set in 'an old place in Italy like Orvieto or Siena, but nowhere exact' in which James is aware of the haunting presence (p. 2), continuing to describe this as a haunting experience:

No matter how hard he tried to remember, he was still not sure if he had a companion; perhaps he did, or perhaps it was merely someone who walked behind him. He could not recall much about this shadowy, intermittent presence, but for some of the time there seemed to be a person or voice close to him. (p. 2)

In 'A More Elaborate Web', Tóibín also describes his own visit to Siena as part of his preparation for writing *The Master*. He begins his description of this walk with an admission: 'One day I decided that no matter what happened it would become the opening of my novel'.⁶³ Tóibín also refers to and identifies the other presences on the streets of Siena: 'there were figures in the middle of the square and they were, I think, workers and there was some sort of demonstration and one or two of them turned towards us but for no special reason'.⁶⁴ Rendered in *The Master*, the scene becomes filled with uncertainty; he was 'not sure if he had a companion', which remains 'shadowy, intermittent' in his dreams. Notably, Tóibín's description of his walk through the Italian city also recalls one of the biographical tales recounted by Freud in 'The Uncanny', in which he experiences the feeling of déjà vu after returning to the same spot while lost walking through the streets of 'a provincial town

⁶³ Tóibín, 'A More Elaborate Web', p. 27.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

in Italy'.⁶⁵ The scene belongs to Freud, then to Tóibín, and finally to James, as it becomes appropriated in turn by each of the three figures.

Further references to an unnamed presence made in the novel provide projections of the future as much as they hint at James's past. The next such reference pulls the focus further yet from the figure of James. Tóibín says of his subject: 'He lived, at times, he felt, as if his life belonged to someone else, a story that had not yet been written, a character who had not been fully imagined'.⁶⁶ Described in this passage, James's life is viewed as an object of ownership, and it is instead its unknown future owner who comes into focus. It is Tóibín who once again enters the frame as the author or owner who writes the story of both James's character and his life yet to be written, and which in turn become manifest within the pages of *The Master*. In this sense, Tóibín writes himself into the narrative as the figure that haunts his character James, and in turn haunts the pages of the novel, just as the experience is passed from Freud to Tóibín and to James in the earlier scene.

While Tóibín's James is seen to be occupied by looking out of the windows of his metaphorical 'house of fiction', it is Tóibín who 'fully imagine[s]' (p. 118) his subject through the process of inversion, thereby redefining James's 'house of fiction' as a self-reflexive experience of literary creativity. This inversion can be seen once James becomes installed within Lamb House, where its four walls provide an appropriate setting within which to imagine the author-figure and the creative process. In the following passage, Tóibín and James become the authors and the subjects of each other's writing, as the past and the future are once again figured

⁶⁵ Freud, p. 237.

⁶⁶ Tóibín, *The Master*, p. 118.

simultaneously in the novel. As the emergent figures become more fully realised, they do so within the walls of Lamb House:

He had found a fictional character who interested him, a serious-minded journalist, sensitive, intelligent and talented [...] He had this morning described such a figure coming to Lamb House after the death of a writer very much like himself, standing in the very study in which he was then dictating, and taking possession of the papers and letters there. But the journalist as he imagined him was also as close to himself as he could make him, and thus he set out to dramatize his own self haunting the space he would leave when he died [...] No one reading the story, he thought, would guess that he was playing with such vital elements, masking and unmasking himself. (pp. 304-5)

This passage initially appears to present James in the process of creating one of his future stories; allusions to both George Withermore of 'The Real Right Thing' (which James wrote in 1899, the same year in which this scene is set), as well as Spencer Brydon's New York double from 'The Jolly Corner' (written later in 1908) can be identified here. At the same time, the passage reveals Tóibín engaged in the same act of literary creation that he attributes to his subject. As he writes the words as they appear in the novel, Tóibín is in fact 'dramati[sing] his own self', 'haunting the space' of Lamb House as well as haunting James himself, just as he does so in 'The Haunting of Lamb House'. The feeling of uncertainty is continued here, as Tóibín plays with notions of the *real* and the *imaginary* when he presents these thoughts as the product of James's imagination. The subject is a 'fictional' character based upon 'a writer very much like' James, but neither is it explicitly James. It is this movement between the real and the fictional, between the self and the other, that is evident here, and which can be seen to repeat as a motif throughout the rest of *The Master*. James appears to be conjuring a character such as Tóibín, while Tóibín simultaneously writes himself into the novel, mediated through James's consciousness.

We see in Tóibín 'the figure coming to Lamb House [...] standing in the very study', as he searches James's home looking for the literary inspiration that he then offers to his character in this particular scene. Tóibín becomes more overtly represented as a character in his own novel, and who periodically reveals and conceals himself behind his fictional Henry James. The images of James and Tóibín become interchangeable, as the focus shifts back and forth between himself and his literary subject. The 'fictional' character is at once like James, and also like Tóibín. In playfully trying to assert the hidden identity of this character, ('No one [...] would guess', he claims) James (or Tóibín) instead invites the reader to consider the identity of the figure in a playful way, by revealing and then concealing his identity. What becomes evident is the way that Tóibín uses Lamb House as a symbolic barrier behind which to conceal (and occasionally to reveal) his own self. *The Master* is Tóibín's 'shell' or 'façade', just as Lamb House is presented as James's source of protection: in the process of inverting James's 'house of fiction' to look back inside the walls of the house, Tóibín in turn becomes caught within the 'house of fiction' as he constructs it.

In the concluding passage of *The Master*, the permanence of the house as a literary tool is asserted. Having bidden farewell to his brother William, sister-in-law Alice and niece Peggy following their prolonged stay in Rye, the novel closes with James now left alone within Lamb House, feeling content at his own solitude. As has become characteristic of the novel, however, the identity of the figure depicted here remains ambiguous. Tóibín writes:

Lamb House was his again. He moved round it relishing the silence and the emptiness [...] He walked up and down the stairs, going into the rooms as though they too, in how they yielded to him, belonged to an unrecoverable past, and would join the room with the tasseled tablecloths and the screens and the shadowed corners, and all the rooms from whose

windows he had observed the world, so that they could be remembered and captured and held. (p. 359)

The ownership of the house is at once attributed to James, but its rooms are said to be possessed by an 'unrecoverable past'. One can overlay the description of James walking through the rooms of Lamb House, with that of Tóibín, as he describes his visit to the house as he searches for inspiration for his novel.⁶⁷ Once again, the house conjures both an 'unrecoverable past' as well as the yet-to-be-realised future; reflected in the historical author Henry James, and the contemporary author Colm Tóibín. The 'tasseled tablecloths', 'screens' and 'shadowed corners' are specifically mentioned, all of which stress the capacity to hide, cover and conceal spaces, objects and human figures. Most significantly, however, the final sentence does not place the author back at the windows from which James was initially seen to observe the world, to look for further literary inspiration. It is the rooms rather than the windows of the house that become the focus of attention to be 'remembered', 'captured' and 'held'; each of the three words implying future use (potentially by James as well as by Tóibín). It is what is located inside the house that becomes of central importance at this point, for it is Tóibín's internalised vision of James's house that creates images of both the author-figure and the process of literary creativity, and it is Tóibín's novel that has the capacity to remember, capture, and hold the images first perceived by the author.

For David Lodge's James, the construction of the author involves a concern with outward appearances, as Lodge plays on James's description of Lamb House as

⁶⁷ In 'The Haunting of Lamb House' Tóibín describes an almost identical experience in Lamb House: 'I now had what I was searching for — the two objects over the mantelpieces, the view, the height of the upstairs bedrooms. All I needed now was to get back to work. In the meantime, I walked one last time through the downstairs rooms of Lamb House, the house where James wrote all his later masterpieces, the house where his old ghost, quiet and refined, and dedicated still perhaps to art at its most pure and life at its most complex, walks proudly now that his reputation as an artist continues to grow and his books are still being read' (pp. 19-20).

a 'façade'. In the description of Lamb House as a ship of which James is the captain, he is seen to be playing a part for the benefit of his audience. It is within this context that parallels can be drawn between the house and the theatre as platforms upon which such public images can be produced.

James's theatrical endeavours and attempts to find success as a playwright have been largely accepted by critics as the central plot of *Author, Author*. The academic Karen Scherzinger notes how both *The Master* and *Author, Author* refer to the opening event of *Guy Domville*, and considers how the theatre functions as a metaphor through which both Tóibín and Lodge each 'stage' their versions of Henry James. The 'debâcle', she explains, 'resonates, in strikingly similar ways, within the deep narrative of these novels, the metaphorical force of the (re)staging of James, paradoxically indexing the elusiveness of their subject'.⁶⁸ I would go even further by stating that, while the theatre provides an ideal frame through which to perceive the presentation of both Lodge's narrative and the '(re)staging' of his subject Henry James, it is through the context of the house that James's authorial image is more fully explored in *Author, Author*. Lodge additionally draws the house into his narrative as a symbol of the process of this '(re)staging'. Looking back at the real-life accounts of Lodge, Tóibín and Heyns in Lamb House, the actions of the literary pilgrims of James's short story 'The Birthplace' and James's interview with Sydney Brooks 'Mr. Henry James at Home', each of these examples demonstrates that it is within the confines of the home — Lamb House in particular — where the author is both viewed and performed. Scherzinger notes how 'we are reminded at every turn that the theat[re] is a treacherously duplicitous place, in which verisimilitude and

⁶⁸ Karen Scherzinger, 'Staging Henry James: Representing the Author in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author! A Novel*', *Henry James Review*, 29.2 (2008), 181-96 (p. 182). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

artifice jostle for position' (p. 182). The very nature of the biographical novel, with its blending of biography and fiction, challenges these opposing ideas of the real and the imaginary. By using the theatre as a framing device, Lodge creates additional layers of 'verisimilitude' and 'artifice' in the narrative of his novel. In a passage that echoes the words of Scherzinger, he writes: 'In the theatre, as in all art, successful illusion was produced by a professional mastery of the appropriate technique, not by amateurish authenticity'.⁶⁹ The aim of the artist, so Lodge suggests here, is to achieve a semblance or performance of reality, rather than any assumed representation of it. This idea of performance is reflected not only in James's theatrical ambitions and the *Guy Domville* project, but is extended to 'all art': incorporating James's novel writing and, by association, Lodge's also. Referring to the 'professional mastery', Lodge playfully alludes to James's sobriquet 'the Master', and his own role in portraying this subject through his literary trade. In what is a complex passage, the terms 'professional mastery' and 'amateurish authenticity' themselves exude contradictory qualities, with each term presenting the opposite characteristics to those that they describe; to perfect a performance is to successfully create one's authorial image.

A description of James offered at the start of the novel shows him also adopting a more performative role in the narrative, attempting to become both a playwright and a performer. In the eyes of his servants: 'James played the part of a gentleman — his impeccable manners, his elaborate verbal courtesies, his dashing waistcoats' (p. 5). He adopts the characteristics, the lines, as well as the costumes appropriate for the character of the 'gentleman' that he plays. At first glance, *Author, Author* is a novel that charts the trials faced by Henry James in his attempts to achieve success as a playwright, featured by Lodge in the disastrous opening night of

⁶⁹ Lodge, *Author, Author*, p. 132.

James's play *Guy Domville* in January 1895. It is in the theatre that James wishes to make his name as a successful literary figure, but it is in the process depicted by Lodge that we see James transgress the boundaries from his back-of-house role as the playwright to being a performer on his own stage: Lamb House. However, even the playwright is deemed to be a part to be rehearsed and performed, like a character from James's play. During the rehearsals for his first play *The American*, staged in 1891, we see James preparing himself for the role as the successful playwright:

On an impulse he parted the two flaps, stepped out in front of the curtain, and looked into the enormous maw of the dark, empty auditorium. He waited a few moments till his eyes accommodated to the gloom and he was quite sure he was alone. Then, gravely and deliberately, he practiced a bow. (p. 123)

It becomes apparent that James's own perception of his literary reputation is not dependent solely upon the public's reception of *Guy Domville*; it is also reliant upon James's convincing performance as a successful playwright. The failure of *Guy Domville* at its now infamous opening night also signals James's failed attempt to carve an image of himself as a successful literary figure. The narrative details the preparations undertaken by James in order to stage his play, with a long chapter dedicated to the opening night as told from the multiple viewpoints of James and his friends in the audience. Although this event is widely considered to provide the climax of Lodge's novel, the narrative does not conclude at this point, but continues to show James installed in his beloved Lamb House, some two years following the first production of *Guy Domville*. It is in Lamb House that we see James preparing to write his three 'major novels'; *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. James's move to Lamb House instead signals a transitional phase in the construction of his authorial image.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Lodge situates James alongside other writers. When considered specifically in relation to writers from the past, Lodge's subject struggles to imagine himself as advancing beyond his predecessors, and it is in this inability to perceive himself moving forward as a writer that many of his professional anxieties lie:

By the end of the 1880s Henry had become increasingly anxious about the progress of his career as a novelist — or rather, about its lack of progress. At the beginning of the decade he had set himself an ambitious programme, to [...] establish him as the rightful successor to the great English novelists of the previous generation — Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot'. (p. 94)

Lodge implies here that James is unable to situate or positively identify himself comfortably within an established tradition of writers. We see him looking back to figures from the past, but unable to carve an image of himself as a model for the future: in this sense he remains inanimate. Attempts to situate James alongside his literary contemporaries in positive terms, however, are equally unsuccessful. Lodge writes:

He felt he was in danger of losing his identity as a writer, falling into a void between a fading reputation as a novelist and a still elusive one as a dramatist [...] Meanwhile he was tormented by the spectacle of other writers — Kipling, Wilde, Thomas Hardy, for instance, not to mention Mrs Humphry Ward — getting the kind of attention and praise that he felt was his due. (p. 167)

Lodge's subject neither belongs to any of these literary groups, nor does he exist independently from other writer-figures. The phrases chosen here; 'losing his identity as a writer'; 'void'; 'fading reputation' and 'elusive' are all profoundly negative terms, where James falls into the shadows of the others. Yet, these other writers are

described as a 'spectacle', suggesting that they too perform their own roles like characters in a play.

The novel's title reflects the way in which Lodge constructs and presents the author-figure in *Author, Author*, as well as indicating the presence of more than one author in the narrative. It has been widely observed that the repetition of the two 'authors' in the title denotes both a doubling of writer-figures, as well as referring to terminology used in the theatre; alluding to the cries of adulation from the theatre audience.⁷⁰ In his review of *Author, Author*, the critic Adam Mars-Jones suggests that the title's reference to the theatre serves as 'announcing the moment when the solitary artist emerges from the wings as a public figure', but as the title suggests, Lodge's artist is anything but solitary.⁷¹ The doubled image of author-figures as conjured by the title of the novel reflects not just on its narrative, but also on the process of its composition. Running parallel to the story of James's theatrical endeavours is an account of his friendship with fellow writer and cartoonist George du Maurier. Lodge uses the character of du Maurier as a counterpart to his character James, and it is against the former's unexpected literary success that James is aligned as a comparative failure. While James is repeatedly presented in relation to other writers in this novel, it is against du Maurier (and to a lesser degree Constance Fenimore Woolson) that the most detailed comparisons are made. We see du Maurier's attempts at literary success unfolding concurrently with James's efforts to become a renowned playwright, but du Maurier's unexpected success with his novel *Trilby* (1895) contrasts with Lodge's negative representation of James and his comparative failure

⁷⁰ Both Karen Scherzinger and Adam Mars-Jones (see note below) have made such observations about the ambiguity of the novel's title in the essay 'Staging Henry James Representing the Author in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* and David Lodge's *Author, Author! A Novel*' and book review 'James the Second' respectively.

⁷¹ Adam Mars-Jones, 'James the Second', *Observer*; 12 Sept 2004 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/sep/12/fiction.davidlodge>> [accessed 3 September 2008] (para. 1 of 17).

in the theatre. Lodge admits in his essay 'The Year of Henry James' that it is James's friendship with du Maurier that provided the initial source of inspiration for the novel as a whole (p. 20). This motivation leads one to consider the process of its composition, through which the self-referential practice of writing about writing once again draws Lodge into the frame of his own novel.

Lodge presents du Maurier as the figure against whom James most often compares himself in *Author, Author*, and throughout the narrative, we see James's authorial identity shifting in response to the changes that occur in du Maurier's own professional circumstances. The friendship between the two men moves from something 'harmonious and enjoyable' (p. 273) to eventually being 'eaten away from within by the worm of envy and jealousy' (p. 273) when du Maurier achieves the kind of literary success that James had hoped for himself. When compared to other writer figures, James is unable to perceive an image of himself in positive terms. It is only after the death of du Maurier, when James engages in the process of writing about another writer, that he begins to perceive himself in such positive terms. Lodge writes of the obituary James wrote on the death of du Maurier:

Reading the finished article through for the last time, before sending it off to *Harper's*, he realised it was as much about himself as about du Maurier — about confronting, defining and refining his own literary ambitions. (p. 338)

Writing about another writer is exactly what Lodge is also engaged in within the pages of *Author, Author*, and it is through the replication of this act that an additional layer of self-referentiality is created in this novel. While Lodge reveals the form of the novel through its content, he also alludes to his own role as an author, and offers his reader glimpses here of his presence within the narrative as its creator. Referring to James's piece on du Maurier produces the author in triplicate, as James, du

Maurier as well as Lodge each emerge through the text. The irony of the statement 'it was as much about himself' (p. 338) becomes apparent as the identity of this self becomes unclear. The replication of the author-figures occurs here as a solitary figure caught in a hall of mirrors; a recreation of the multiple author-figures that became manifest during one of Lodge's visits to Lamb House (as discussed earlier in this chapter). What is significant here is not only the proliferation of authors as a result of this writing process, but its timing in the narrative of *Author, Author*. Lodge chooses to situate this moment directly before James's acquisition of Lamb House, thus marking a transitional moment in the creation of Henry James as the image of a successful author. At this time, so Lodge notes, Rye and its surrounding area was 'becoming a popular habitat for authors' (p. 345) and friends such as Edmund Gosse, H.G. Wells, Ford Madox Hueffer, Joseph Conrad and Stephen Crane are all named as either local residents or regular visitors to Lamb House (pp. 344-45). It is only after the *Guy Domville* episode that the theme of the house gains momentum in *Author, Author*, and is used increasingly regularly from this point in the novel. Lodge shows James conceiving the idea of and composing *The Spoils of Poynton*, which is described as a story 'about a widow and her son who fell out concerning the ownership of a house full of beautiful "things" which the mother appreciated and the son merely coveted' (p. 285). Most significantly, it is the first piece of prose writing that James produces following the disappointment of his theatrical efforts. The novel was begun in 1896 when James had moved from London to 'The Blomfields' cottage at Playden' (p. 317) near Rye, and was contemplating a new permanent home in the area.

The penultimate chapter of *Author, Author* opens with the first glimpse of James installed in his newly acquired Lamb House. The opening is striking in its

familiarity because we see James waking in his bedroom; another scene redolent of Lodge's own experiences during the visit to Lamb House described in 'The Year of Henry James'. By comparison he describes James's experience in the novel:

The sun woke him early, shining through a gap in the curtains. It rose over the church, and on a clear morning there was always a brief moment when it directed a bright beam straight down West Street, into the King's Room and onto his pillow. (p. 341)

Lodge projects his own feelings of excitement and anticipation onto his James in this scene; a feeling that marks a change in the tone with which his fictional subject is represented in his capacity as an author figure. Lodge also strongly hints at his own experience here when he writes of James: 'He vividly recalled moving through the house as if in a dream' (p. 341). The same image of James lying in his bed appears again in the following pages of the novel: 'He did not repine at having woken early. He was content to lie there, just enjoying the simple sensation of happiness, in the chamber where a king saved from drowning had lain nearly two centuries ago' (p. 343). The Freudian sense of uncanny repetition is perpetuated here, with Lodge thinking about his own experience of writing. In this example, the image of James is used as an effigy upon which Lodge projects his own experiences as a writer and, in the process, confuses the boundaries between the self and other, author and subject, autobiography and biography. It is significant that the episode that Lodge transposes from his own experience onto his fictional portrait of James exudes the impression of professional success as an author, expressed with a tone of positivity. Aware of the way in which authors have been disregarded by poststructuralist theory (especially that of Roland Barthes), this passage from *Author, Author* also suggests that Lodge, whilst affirming his own success as an author (which he does more explicitly in the novel's epilogue) is also implicitly asserting his own status and career as an author.

He addresses any possible anxiety surrounding the contemporary status of the author by enforcing a positive image of his own authorship.

The anticipated literary success that James achieves later in his career is attributed to his new home, as Lodge declares: 'Nothing had been more striking, or more gratifying, about his acquisition of Lamb House than its effect on his creative imagination' (p. 346). Referring to *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*, Lodge shows how James was 'not ready to begin them yet, but he felt a serene inner certainty that he would write them in Lamb House' (p. 349). James's renewed confidence in his professional abilities and his desire to return to writing novels chimes with Lodge's own feeling of being ready to write *Author, Author* after his visits to Lamb House, and it is with an image of James poised to continue writing his novel *The Awkward Age* (1899) that the main section of the novel concludes: 'quickening his step he made his way to the Garden Room [...] He looked forward immensely to the morning's work' (p. 352). The words 'looked forward' hold particular significance in their ambiguity; referring to both the enjoyment James hopes to feel through the production of his writing, as well as implying that by doing so he in some way indicates a vision of the future and therefore implicating Lodge and his own experience of writing *Author, Author*. This is until Lodge reveals 'himself' (or a version of himself) as the author when he steps out of the wings at the end of the novel. It is at the end of the prologue, as we see James in his final moments, that Lodge writes himself into the scene, standing by his subject's side: 'while for me, as I conjure up this deathbed scene, looking at it as through the curved transparency of a crystal ball' (p. 373). James's extinction from the physical world is marked here by Lodge's future accession as his literary heir — not only to his work — but also to his authorial representation. Tóibín and Lodge demonstrate the many

varying manifestations of the author-figure as they appear in their biographical novels. Both *The Master* and *Author, Author* become increasingly self-reflexive, as they show James in relation to other writer-figures before these multiple figures merge into a singular form behind which the self (Tóibín/Lodge) and the other (James) are revealed and concealed. At the close of *The Master*, Lamb House has the power to contain or 'capture' the ambiguous author-figure, but in *Author, Author* the movement from Lamb House to James's deathbed scene in his London flat marks the final divergence of James's character from Lodge's own fictional representation within the narrative.

3.7 Locating the Author in the House

As *The Master* and *Author, Author* exemplify, the practice of constructing an image of the author-figure no longer suggests a preoccupation with wealth, social status or professional success as it did for Henry James. One hundred years on, representations of the author-figure signal more of a concern with the fundamental experience of *being* an author. In the case of Henry James, the writer's house functions as the 'shell' or 'façade' behind which Tóibín internalises the writerly experience. For Lodge, however, Lamb House is adopted as a platform upon which authorship is revealed to be a performance. The introverted James of Tóibín's novel, that we see hidden within the walls of Lamb House, stands in contrast to Lodge's James, whose home is used as a stage on which to rehearse and refine his public authorial image. What both novels provide, however, is a reflection of the creative process. Tóibín's internalised house of fiction revises James's creative experience,

while the rehearsal of James's performance in Lodge's novel mirrors the process involved in the staging of a play. In each case, both Tóibín and Lodge are at once concealed behind and revealed within their own narratives, as they periodically pick up and discard their images of James. In this sense, they too can be seen to 'frustrate as utterly as possible the postmortem exploiter' as a result of the continuous process of revelation and concealment that occurs between the novelist and his biographical subject.⁷² To return to the words of Virginia Woolf on her visit to Stratford-upon-Avon, the author-figure is 'serenely absent-present, both at once [...] never to be pinned down', not because the house becomes an arbitrary construct within which to situate the author-figure, but as a result of the reflexive nature of this authorial identity.⁷³

Freud's theory of the Uncanny exposes how the existence of the self must be regarded in relation to the other, and we see this played out in Tóibín and Lodge's portraits of James. However, as Cixous's revision of Freud's theory reveals, his own articulation of the other compulsively springs back to the self. It is through this complex negotiation of the self and other that both Tóibín and Lodge reassert the figure of the author within the contemporary biographical novel. Once again, we see the perpetuation and expression of the blurred boundaries between biography, autobiography and fiction first demonstrated by life-writers of the modernist period. This trait is evident in James's 'The Birthplace', is inadvertently articulated in Freud's theme of the uncanny, and finds expression in these contemporary biographical novels.

⁷² James, *The Letters of Henry James Volume 4*, p. 806.

⁷³ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 4*, p. 219.

Chapter 4 – Woolfian Portraits: Writing, Painting, and the Visual Image of the Author in *The Hours* and *Vanessa and Virginia*

The preceding examples of Sylvia Plath and Henry James demonstrate a particular moment of fictionalising the lives of real-life authors, also evident in the case of Virginia Woolf and the contemporary biographical novel. In 1998 Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* first appeared, in which Woolf is simultaneously written and read in her role as an author, through the filter of her own novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). In Gillian Freeman's *But Nobody Lives in Bloomsbury* (2006), it is not specifically Woolf but the whole of the Bloomsbury Group that becomes the focus of her story. Sigrid Nunez's *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (1998) takes Leonard and Virginia Woolf's pet marmoset as the focus of her fictional portrait of the Woolfs, itself a play on Woolf's spoof biography *Flush* (1933), a fictional portrait of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet dog. Attention to the writing figure is concentrated again in Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* (2008), which explores Woolf's literary artistry alongside the visual creativity of her sister Vanessa Bell. Continuing the growing trend for fictional representations of Woolf, Maggie Gee published *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2014), in which Woolf is brought back to life in New York in the present day. Most recently, Priya Parmar's *Vanessa and Her Sister* (2015) presents a second fictional portrait of Woolf as seen through the eyes of her sister Bell. I will take *The Hours* and *Vanessa and Virginia*, with their shared interest and focus on Woolf as a writer, as the subject of this chapter. In particular, I wish to explore the relationships that exist between reading and writing, those between writing and painting, and the impact upon the biographical novelists' constructions of Woolf as a literary figure.

The question of how to write a literary life, and the self-conscious representation of the writing figure, are two key elements that thread through Woolf's writing. Artist figures appear repeatedly within the writing of Virginia Woolf in both her fiction and non-fiction, so her multiple appearances as a semi-fictional character in these biographical novels reveal not only a reflection of her own literary motifs but also a more fundamental engagement with the question of how to write such a life.¹ To write a fictional life of a real-life author is itself a profoundly 'Woolfian' undertaking, so it is only appropriate to turn to the work of this subject for the questions she poses and the answers that she offers in doing so. Woolf's writing provides a mirror against which to reflect contemporary formations of the author figure; therefore it will be useful to begin this chapter with a consideration of how writer figures are presented by Woolf in her own writing.

For a writer like Woolf, who has become the focus of such intense biographical interest, it is significant to observe how she herself wrote the literary subject. Woolf wrote *Orlando* and the essay 'A Room of One's Own' in quick succession; the first in 1928 and the second a year later in 1929. In both she responds to the question that threads through her life's writing: how to write a life, and, more specifically in the latter, how to represent the literary life. While entitled *Orlando: A Biography*, Woolf's work is explicitly a fiction. Loosely based upon the life and genealogy of Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West, the novelist borrows the conventions

¹ Woolf writes about Terence Hewet in her first published novel *The Voyage Out* (1915); Katherine Hilbery in *Night and Day* (1919); the poet Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925); the painter Lily Briscoe in *To The Lighthouse* (1927); the eponymous poet of *Orlando* (1928); the three writing 'selves' Mary Beton, Mary Seton and Mary Carmichael of 'A Room of One's Own' (1929); Bernard of *The Waves* (1931) and Miss La Trobe of *Between the Acts* (1941). In addition to these fictional writers, Woolf has also written fictional representations of real-life authors; both James Boswell and William Shakespeare are given fleeting appearances in *Orlando*, and a comic portrait of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is featured in Woolf's spoof biography, *Flush* (1933). Woolf's focus turned from biographical to more explicitly autobiographical representation towards the end of her life, when she wrote about her own experience as a writer in the posthumously published essay 'Sketch of the Past,' in 1939.

of life-writing to create her story and, by drawing attention to the use of these conventions, produces a deeply self-conscious work of literature. References to the role of the biographer are repeatedly made throughout the text, and in the process Woolf exposes herself both as the biographer, and as the novelist. During one of the many interjections, the narrator-biographer exclaims that:

Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one blast, Truth! and sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth!²

By highlighting the supposed gravity of 'Truth' in this portrait and by capitalising the letters of this key word, Woolf asserts and exposes its status as a fictional construct. Her creation of the three fictional Gods, each bearing a different mantle of verisimilitude, is in itself a contradiction; one that casts still further doubt upon anything that is described as truthful within the pages of *Orlando*.

It is no coincidence that Orlando is a writer (Vita Sackville-West was herself a published poet and novelist), and we see Woolf's character composing his/her poem 'The Oak Tree' throughout the centuries of his/her life as it is charted throughout the novel. We see the poem in a continuous state of composition and, as the narrator remarks towards the close of the novel, its author: 'had been working at it for close on three-hundred years now' (p. 226). Although Woolf is keen to stress Orlando's status as a poet throughout the novel, she also poses the question of how to represent the literary act of creation. We see Orlando attempting to compose the poem 'The Oak Tree' without success at various points of the novel. But when the problem of

² Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* ([1928] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 129. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

literary inspiration is resolved, Orlando begins to write once again. Woolf replaces one resolution with another challenge that faces the literary biographer:

Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking. Thought and life are as poles asunder [...] this thinking; this sitting in a chair day in, day out, with a cigarette and a sheet of paper and a pen and an ink pot. If only subjects, we might complain (for our patience is wearing thin), had more consideration for their biographers! (pp. 254-55)

In this statement, Woolf problematises the very thing that remains the object of fascination for the literary biographer: the experience of literary creativity. To portray the writing subject during the moment of literary inspiration produces, Woolf implies here, a dull image of an inert figure whose thoughts cannot be accessed. Neither the biographer nor the reader can understand the inner experience of the writer, so Woolf overcomes this problem by turning the picture, and herself, into a fiction. This moment of creativity presented here is not Orlando's but rather Woolf's, and her position as mock 'biographer' in this tale. As she describes the writer sitting in a chair with the cigarette, paper and pen in her hands, Woolf is also implicated in this scene as we imagine her as well as Orlando posing as the writer.

In her later essay 'A Room of One's Own', Woolf goes on to focus more specifically on the creation of the writing subject. It is in this essay that she most explicitly addresses the question of becoming a writer, and the issues that exist surrounding the construction of the writerly figure. While Woolf permits the narrator-biographer to creep into *Orlando* as an intermittently concealed presence within the text, in 'A Room of One's Own' Woolf advances this idea of the evasive identity of the writing self. Real-life becomes fiction and fiction becomes real-life in this essay,

as Woolf continues to adopt the blending of genres exploited in *Orlando*. She juxtaposes real-life women authors such as Fanny Burney, Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell alongside the fictional Judith Shakespeare and her narrators Mary Beton, Mary Seton and Mary Carmichael.

Using the example of the real-life Lady Winchilsea, she highlights the absence of biographical information on women writers from the past: 'She "must have" I say, because when one comes to seek out the facts about Lady Winchilsea, one finds, as usual, that almost nothing is known about her'.³ It is from the lack of historical detail that Woolf approaches her task of writing about women writers from both the past and present, and which motivates her response to compensate for this lack of documentary evidence, by addressing the subject of women and fiction through the medium of fiction. She remarks: 'Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction — so we are told' (p. 12). If the past cannot offer a comprehensive and reliable history of the female literary tradition, then Woolf has the freedom to invent one for her reader.

At the start of this essay, the narrator illustrates how she will guide her reader through this process of creation: 'I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money. I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought which led me to think this' (p. 2). As with the earlier example in which Orlando sits thinking about her poem, revealing little about the creative experience, the narrator of 'A Room of One's Own' asserts that the best way to capture the image of the writer is through the process of creativity. Here Woolf hints at both the contemporaneity of the writing

³ Virginia Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own' in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* ([1929] London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 01-98 (p. 51). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

process and the complimentary process of reading, so that the reader feels that he or she is producing an impression of the room at the same time that they are reading the words of Woolf's essay. The experience of literary creativity is best described not as something already achieved, but as something still in the process of creation. We see Woolf continually reinventing her writing persona: at the beginning of her essay she declares: 'Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael, or by any name you please — it is not a matter of any importance)' (p. 2). The identity of the narrating 'I' is exchanged throughout the essay until she is suddenly renounced at the end:

Here, then, Mary Beton ceases to speak. She has told you how she reached the conclusion — the prosaic conclusion — that it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry. (p. 10)

Woolf finally claims: 'I will end in my own voice' (p. 91), and it is through this that the final thoughts of her essay are delivered. Whether this is in fact Woolf's 'voice' or that of another of her narrating personas remains another point of ambiguity in 'A Room of One's Own'. Initially presented as a lecture, Woolf delivered her essay by speaking the words of each of her different authorial personas, a strategy that heightens the blurring of fact and fiction that threads throughout 'A Room of One's Own'.

When Woolf comes to depict the room deemed to be central to the birth of the woman writer, she presents a space that is almost empty; devoid of any writing presence. As the reader is led to the anticipated scene of writing, they are invited to construct the picture in his or her imagination. Of a room in London, she writes:

The scene, if I may ask you to follow me, was now changed [...] and I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window

looking across peoples' hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters WOMEN AND FICTION, but no more. (p. 20)

The reader is invited 'to follow' the narrator, as they both endeavour to 'imagine' a room that conjures an impression unique to the writer, and to each individual reader. Woolf is not inviting her reader to envisage a specific or unified physical space as such, but rather encourages them to use their imaginations (the same tool required for literary creativity) in order to create their own unique impressions. The room is empty except for the sparse furniture; the sheet of paper remains blank apart from its title. Just as she does in *Orlando*, Woolf resists showing the writing subject during a moment of composition. The narrator remains at once 'absent-present'⁴ (as Woolf herself described the spirit of Shakespeare during her visit to Stratford-upon-Avon in May 1938, as detailed in the previous chapter). It is left to the reader to populate this skeletal image with a vision of her own (literal or metaphorical) room, allowing potential for an infinite number of different rooms to be imagined. The paper is almost blank because the essay is yet to be written.

Instead, Woolf chooses to convey the experience of literary creativity by highlighting the mechanics behind its production. In *Orlando* she achieves this by drawing attention to the voice of the narrator-biographer; in 'A Room of One's Own' Woolf exposes the constructed nature of the scene she puts before her reader, as well as her role in its production. When the narrator (at this moment Mary Beton) eventually begins to write on the blank sheet of paper, it is performed in a manner that reiterates both the ongoing moment of creation, and the ambiguity of the writing subject:

⁴ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 4*, p. 219.

The very first sentence that I would write here, I said, crossing over to the writing-table and taking up the page headed Women and Fiction, is that it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.⁵

To focus on being simply a man or a woman is to draw attention back to the literary history of women that is yet to be written, or indirectly to the dominant literary heritage written by and for men. Once again, Woolf presents the scene as the reader is invited to imagine the action being performed, and the significant factor is to be engaged in an ongoing process of literary creation. What remains of primary importance here is not the biographical details of a writer's life or even the fact that for women many are still to be written, but what *makes* a writer. Woolf concludes her essay with some final thoughts on the subject: 'So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters, and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, no one can say' (pp. 91-92). Just as the tradition of women's writing begins to be written, the writer, like her essay 'Women and Fiction', continues to be composed. The female writer is not created in the sense of a singular and corporeal being, but as an ideological construct. Referring to William Shakespeare's fictional sister Judith, Woolf declares:

this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here to-night [...] But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. (p. 98)

Throughout her essay, Woolf insists that the writer is not one single, coherent being, but an ongoing project transgressing temporal and generic boundaries. The writer is, she asserts, 'in you and me, and in many other women'; the writing figure is not one

⁵ Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own', pp. 89-90.

that has lived and been preserved in biographies, but one that continues to exist in the present day. If the 'experience of the mass is behind the single voice' (p. 56), then the female writer will have continued to grow and evolve as a project involving countless women and spanning countless years. To represent such a figure in literary biography, so Woolf implores, one must be able to express the qualities of plurality and changeability, as well as the very process of the text's construction.

4.1 Reading Woolf, Writing the Author

Virginia Woolf has received a remarkable level of biographical attention since her death in 1941.⁶ Although Woolf's contributions to the tradition of life writing were made in the first half of the twentieth century, interest in Woolf as a biographical subject only gained momentum in the 1970s following the publication of Quentin Bell's biography of his aunt; *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (1972). Earlier biographical studies, such as Aileen Pippett's *The Moth and The Star* (1953) generated comparatively little interest. In the decades that have passed since Bell's biography, Woolf has become the subject of intense biographical attention. Considering the body of Woolf biographies as a whole, the academic Mark Hussey acknowledges the scope of Woolf biographies and how they address different aspects of her life. Alongside studies that present a general chronological overview of

⁶ Significant examples include Aileen Pippett's *The Moth and the Star: A Biography of Virginia Woolf* (1953); Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (1972); Louise DeSalvo's *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (1989); James King's *Virginia Woolf* (1994); Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf* (1996); Nigel Nicolson's *Virginia Woolf* (2000); Julia Briggs's *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (2005); Lyndall Gordon's *Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life* (2006); and Alexandra Harris's *Virginia Woolf* (2011).

Woolf's life, he identifies clusters that focus on aspects of Woolf's mental illness;⁷ those that consider Woolf's life in relation to other friends and relatives; as well as those that approach their subject 'from what might be termed a writerly perspective'.⁸ Woolf has now transformed from being a pioneer of twentieth-century life-writing to become one of the most intensely scrutinised literary biographical subjects of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Significant family members and notable literary and artistic friends also garner interest, but it is the circumstances of her death that have played the greatest part in prompting interest — and inevitable speculation — over the details of Woolf's life.

Woolf also remains such a fascinating biographical subject because she held such complex attitudes to biography and its relationship with fiction. She repeatedly proclaimed the inadequacies of conventional documentary biography in expressing the multiple and changing self, so the task of writing Woolf's life poses a distinct challenge to her biographer. To read any biography of Woolf as an empirical 'Life' of the writer marks a resistance to the theory of life writing that she herself formulated during her own lifetime. In her essay 'Biomythographers: Rewriting the Lives of Virginia Woolf' (1996), the Woolf scholar and biographer Hermione Lee signals this need to observe Woolf's own rules when writing her life. This essay outlines Lee's response to the challenge of writing her acclaimed biography *Virginia Woolf* (1996), and where she acknowledges the significance of all previous Woolf biographies that have been written. She remarks:

⁷ Mark Hussey, 'Biographical Approaches', in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, ed. by Anna Snaith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 83-97 (p. 87).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 86.

the writing of this life can only be a rewriting [...] No new version of a famous life can be rewritten in innocence. There is no such thing as a neutral or objective biography, particularly not in this case. Positions have been taken, myths have been made. Everyone has a view of Virginia Woolf.⁹

For a literary subject such as Woolf, who claimed in her fantasy biography *Orlando* that 'a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand',¹⁰ Lee's idea of biography as only ever being a 'rewriting' of what has been produced before validates her own position on the practice of life writing. Considered in this respect, rewriting a biographical life is not a corrective action but rather a contribution to what is an ongoing process of writing a life. Therefore, the plurality of the multiple versions of Woolf created by these numerous biographies need not be considered a weakness. Commenting on this profusion of biographies, Lee writes: 'Virginia Woolf does not have a life, she has lives. In the [...] years since her death, she has been rewritten by each generation, and appropriated by different and competing readings'.¹¹ Lee presents her own approach to biography: 'Like gossip — and like fiction — biography should record changes in people [...] since we are always altering',¹² echoing a line from Woolf's essay 'The Humane Art' (1940) in which she writes: 'A self that keeps on changing is a self that goes on living',¹³ to which comment Lee adds: 'so too with the biography of that self'.¹⁴ Any biography should reflect the evolution of a life, but more

⁹ Hermione Lee, 'Biomythographers: Writing the Lives of Virginia Woolf', *Essays in Criticism*, 46.2 (1996), 95-114 (p. 95).

¹⁰ Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 295.

¹¹ Lee, 'Biomythographers', p. 107.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹³ Virginia Woolf, 'The Humane Art' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* ([1940] London: The Hogarth Press, 1947) pp. 41-44 (p. 44).

¹⁴ Lee, 'Biomythographers', p. 106.

specifically in the case of Woolf, must also incorporate the vast and changing posthumous life that has been generated in the decades since her death.

Woolf continually looked back to the conventions of Victorian biography in order to formulate new ways of expressing the nature of the human life. It therefore seems appropriate that recent developments in Woolf biographies should also be embracing more experimental forms. The task of writing the 'Lives' of Virginia Woolf has been undertaken by biographers such as Hermione Lee, but more recently by critics and novelists, the latter embracing more openly fictional methods through which to express her life. In recent years, however, biographers and critics alike have responded to Woolf's role in the tradition of life writing, and considered more creative ways of writing about her both within as well as separate to her life as a writer. Studies such as Brenda Silver's *Virginia Woolf Icon* (1999) and Maria DiBattista's *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography* (2009) are two recent examples that 'read' Woolf from opposing perspectives by considering her role as a cultural icon and as a product of her writing respectively. Both offer some context for the writing of the contemporary biographical novel.

Brenda Silver's *Virginia Woolf Icon* remains the greatest exception to this cluster of recent studies, in its exclusion of Woolf's life and reputation as a writer. Silver considers how Woolf's image has been adopted as a visual cultural commodity over the last three decades of the twentieth century, and charts its development in what Hussey describes as 'the biography of an image'.¹⁵ A decade after the publication of *Virginia Woolf Icon*, Maria DiBattista's *Imagining Virginia Woolf* appeared, in which DiBattista constructs her impression of Woolf solely through readings of her subject's work. In this later example, DiBattista emphasises her role

¹⁵ Hussey, p. 85.

as a reader rather than a biographer in the production of what she describes as an experimental biography.

The first of the biographical novels, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, was published in 1998, a year before Silver's study appeared. In this novel, Cunningham reads Woolf's biographical life through her fictional writing when he brings together the lives of three unrelated women from three different decades and three different cities across the twentieth century. He condenses the narrative into one day in the lives of his three female characters, as Woolf initially did for Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway*. He presents Virginia Woolf on a day in 1923, about to begin composing the opening pages of *Mrs Dalloway*. In 2008, the second of these biographical novels on the life of Virginia Woolf, *Vanessa and Virginia* by Susan Sellers, was also published. Moments from Woolf's life are viewed through the eyes of her sister the artist Vanessa Bell, in what can be regarded as a response to Woolf's own memoir of Bell, posthumously published as 'Reminiscences' (written between 1907 and 1908), and in *Vanessa and Virginia* are projected through the context of Bell's role as a painter. In addition to these textual constructions of Woolf's life and writing, visual interpretations have also appeared in recent years. Both *The Hours* and *Vanessa and Virginia* have been subject to screen and stage adaptations. Cunningham's novel was adapted in a film of the same name in 2002, which was directed by Stephen Daldry, while Sellers's novel was translated into a stage production in 2010 by Emma Gersh. Both of these contemporary adaptations have contributed to Woolf's increasing currency within the visual cultural domain.

Brenda Silver's study *Virginia Woolf Icon* signals Woolf's growing prominence as a cultural symbol, at the same time highlighting a simultaneous movement away from her reputation as a writer. In this study, Silver considers the

appropriation of Woolf's image as a visual cultural icon, emergent through the 1970s and evident throughout the remaining three decades of the twentieth century. She identifies

the extensive visual and verbal representations of Virginia Woolf that have circulated in Anglo-American culture for the past thirty-five years, giving her a visibility and an immediacy, a celebrity, rare for a living writer and even rarer for one from the past. Occurring across the cultural terrain, whether in academic discourses, the intellectual media, or mass/popular culture, the proliferation of Virginia Woolfs has transformed the writer into a powerful and powerfully contested cultural icon, whose name, face, and authority are persistently claimed or disclaimed in debates about art, politics, sexuality, gender, class, the 'canon', fashion, feminism, race and anger.¹⁶

Here Silver lays particular emphasis upon the 'visual' and 'verbal' manifestations of Woolf's appearance within contemporary culture, as though it is her image and her voice that gain currency and supersede her reputation as a writer. Conversely, it is the textual representations of Woolf that are disregarded as a result. Particular emphasis is placed on the visual element adopted in these appropriations of Woolf. Elsewhere she states how she 'want[s] to foreground the visual' in her consideration of Woolf as a cultural icon (p. 18). She lists examples as diverse as; appearing in cartoons in the *New Yorker* magazine, advertising products from clothing to alcohol, endorsing political parties and supporting anti-censorship marches, featuring in film and television shows (whether referenced by name or by face), and her name as providing the inspiration for the names of at least two rock bands (p. 8). As these examples demonstrate, this process of appropriation highlights Woolf's transition from a writer to what Silver terms a 'cultural icon' (p. 4), and reveals how this formation of Woolf exists independently from any biographical or literary context.

¹⁶ Brenda Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 3. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

My interest in Silver's study is concerned less with the individual instances of Woolf's appearance as a visual icon across the various cultural forms, and more with the overarching effect that it has had upon the formation and status of Woolf as a subject of biographical interest. While Silver regards this transformation as a 'reduction to a human sound bite [...] a name, a face and an idea' (p. 7), I wish to consider the impact that Woolf's transition from literary figure to 'human sound bite' has upon her image.

Despite this severance of the visual image from the biographical and literary life, Silver identifies a correlation between Woolf's emergence as a cultural icon and the universal interest in her personal and professional life. She cites Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography* (1968) for driving this revival of interest specifically in Woolf and marking a pivotal moment in her status within the cultural domain. Silver remarks: 'From this point on, and the point cannot be overstated, Virginia Woolf acquired an iconicity independent of her academic standing' (p. 9). In this respect, *Virginia Woolf Icon* marks a significant departure from the realm of biographical studies and, more specifically, literary biography.

Silver adopts the term 'versioning' to describe the manner in which the proliferation of Virginia Woolfs has become manifest across the various cultural media. Comparing the use of this term in literary and musical contexts respectively, she argues that in both cases, we witness a favouring of the collective over the individual voice, rendering the formation of Woolf's cultural presence a resemblance of Sylvia Plath's own existence as a dialogic entity. Each 'voice' suggests a conversation or exchange, comprised of the many different voices involved in the process. Silver also observes that: 'while the two usages of the term differ, [she is]

struck by the similarity of the utopian vision, voiced in both cases as a potentially subversive practice whose end is multiplicity, fluidity and change' (p. 14). The principles of versioning as presented here by Silver reflect exactly the image of the ever-changing writer that Woolf herself constructed in her own writing, exemplified by the chameleon-like Orlando or the continually changing narrator of 'A Room of One's Own'. Like Hermione Lee viewing the state of Woolf biographies, Silver recognises the significance that this versioning creates:

my distrust of those who would fix her into any single position, either to praise or blame her, remains my strongest motivation. We cannot stop the proliferation of Virginia Woolfs or the claims to 'truth' or authenticity that accompany each refashioning of her image; nor would I want to, however much I might disagree with or be scared by the effect produced by any particular representation. (p. 5)

Silver's remark regarding the 'proliferation' of Virginia Woolfs indicates less resistance to and a stronger degree of acceptance of the multiple Woolfs existing in the cultural domain. Taking this further still, this particular phenomenon signals a return to Woolf's insistence that 'the experience of the mass is behind the single voice', initially asserted in 'A Room of One's Own'.¹⁷ This time it is not the writer projecting her own presence within a text, but contemporary critics and readers collectively constructing a variable image in her name. Silver adopts filmic imagery to convey this sense of change and movement; referring to film reels, stills and video clips to emphasise how the various visual manifestations of Woolf as a cultural icon comprise part of a larger, moving image. She asserts: 'I see this moment as an episode in an ongoing series rather than a conclusion; there are no final credits' (p. 31); and if each new 'version' of Woolf offers a response to one that has come before, then it can be seen more in terms of a dialogue or conversation, rather than simply a

¹⁷ Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own', p. 56.

random profusion of different images. I wish to consider how the visual and conversational work together, rather than existing as separate entities in the case of Virginia Woolf and her posthumous existence as a cultural icon.

The versioning that Silver identifies provides a parallel to Jacqueline Rose's formation of Sylvia Plath in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. According to Rose, Plath's various 'hauntings' become manifest as literary 'utterances' through which Plath, the custodians of her estate and her many literary critics all speak. In both cases, the 'experience of the mass' speaks on behalf of the subjects in question (Plath and Woolf), highlighting the involvement of others in the production of this authorial image. When Woolf made the statement about the 'experience of the mass' as she was writing 'A Room of One's Own', perhaps she knowingly predicted her own posthumous reception — just as Henry James hints at the significance of posterity through his own writing. Yet what she possibly would not have foreseen is, as Silver highlights, that her role and reputation as a writer are no longer necessarily central to this image formation.

That both biographical novels by Cunningham and Sellers have been adapted from a literary form to the screen and stage indicates the extent to which Woolf maintains a kind of celebrity status today but, more importantly, suggests that the biographical novels by their nature reflect a sense of fluidity in their creation of Woolf as a biographical subject. These adaptations also reunite Woolf's status as a visual cultural icon with her literary reputation and biographical life. If we regard Silver when she explains that 'any reading of a star's "meaning" has to take into account the particular historical moment and the specific group that is responding' (p. 18), we need to consider both the screen and stage adaptations of Woolf's life, as well as the biographical novels that inspired them. Both examples negotiate the space

between the celebrity status of the biographical subject and a return to the practice of writing. Considered in other terms, it also marks a return to the fundamental connection that Woolf herself identified and forged in her own writing, between the author and his or her work. As such, the biographical novel marks both a forward progression, as much as a movement backwards, to Woolf's own assertions regarding the writer and the text.

In 2009, Maria DiBattista published *Imagining Virginia Woolf: an Experiment in Critical Biography*, a study that focusses on the formation and perception of Woolf, this time produced solely through a reading of her writing. As such, it signals a return to the image of the writer that Woolf herself asserted throughout her literary career. It is, after all, her writerly identity and literary practice that underpins much of Woolf's writing, and I will therefore reflect upon how the opposing approaches by Silver and DiBattista inform their respective studies of Woolf. DiBattista asks from the outset of *Imagining Virginia Woolf*, 'How should one read an *author?*', and it is this practice of reading (rather than writing) that shapes her book.¹⁸ Where Silver's study emphasises the material production of her image, DiBattista's focusses on the effect produced by a textual reading of Woolf.

Rather than establishing a 'democratic practice' (p. 13) through which others seek to participate in the creation of Woolf's image, DiBattista's experimental biography reflects the solitary practice of the reader, resulting in 'an image [...] a single impression' (p. 34). This change in approach marks a return to the perception of Woolf as a literary personality; she considers the impressions formed by Woolf's writing but, like Silver, discounts a knowledge of Woolf's biographical life from the

¹⁸ Maria DiBattista, *Imagining Virginia Woolf: an Experiment in Critical Biography* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 4 (original emphasis). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

study. As DiBattista explains, her critical biography bears little resemblance to conventional literary biographies:

The subject of this biography is not the historical person who was born in 1882 and died in 1941. The subject is Virginia Woolf, the figment who exists as much in the minds of her readers as in the pages of her books.
(p. 9)

DiBattista's interest is not in the historical life of Woolf, but something less tangible and more subjective; something as intangible and impressionistic as Woolf's 'absent-present' Shakespeare that she finds on her visit to Stratford-upon-Avon. Here DiBattista attempts to create a new literary form — that of her 'critical biography' — within which to capture a subject that so far defies both conventional biography as well as the purely fictional. She warns against conventional methods of reading a life such as Woolf's, and instead promotes new ways of reading her subject directly through her writing: 'In truth, everything about "Virginia Woolf", author, is in danger of becoming benignly familiar to common readers as well as professional critics — her life, her critical precepts, her feminist politics, the distinctive rhythms of her prose' (p. 64). For DiBattista, the mass of biographical and critical material already in existence that constitutes for Hermione Lee and Mark Hussey the ongoing narrative of Woolf's posthumous biographical life, becomes an obstacle in her method of reading her subject. Perhaps by returning to Woolf as an already-established practice, DiBattista might in fact be able to discover something new in her image of Virginia Woolf.

The focus of *Imagining Virginia Woolf* is what DiBattista refers to as the 'figment' of the author, formed by the impressions gathered over years of reading Woolf's writing. The figment she defines is distinguished from the biographical figure of the author:

This figment may coexist with, but should never be mistaken for, the "figure of the author". I suspect it matters little to most readers whether the author as a literary figure is dead or alive or temporarily missing in action. On the other hand, the figment, being a subjective creation and not a rhetorical or literary personification, has a different reality and possesses a different importance in the mind of the reader. The figment of the author that attends us in our reading tends to be evanescent, is often misconceived, but is never insubstantial in its impact upon us. (p. 6)

DiBattista is keen to stress the difference between her 'figment' as a product of reading, and what she considers to be the 'figure' as the producer of writing. In effect, she adopts new terms through which to readdress Roland Barthes's perceived roles of reader and author. Her figment at times may only create a temporary or evanescent impression, but nevertheless is characteristic of what DiBattista wishes to identify. Using a typically Barthesian strategy, her critical biography shifts the focus away from the historical author as the producer to highlight the reader's role in its production. She explains: 'Writing, we might say, is a spell worked by the figure of the author. The demon of reading works a counterenchantment, beguiling us with a *figment* of the author' (p. 7, original emphasis). Here DiBattista adopts the word 'figure' to denote the historical person and his or her physical presence in the world in contrast to the intangible and subjective 'figment' of the author. I would like to highlight, however, that the term 'figure' remains ambiguous, and can be applied to DiBattista's method of reading; as a noun, 'figure' suggests a physical human form, but used as a verb it also denotes a process of construction, a process that DiBattista does not draw on in her study.

DiBattista acknowledges the extent to which her 'figment of the author' is as subjective and imaginary as the writings from which it is born. She states: 'What I fabricate is an image of her that has slowly formed in my mind — a figment I call it

— from the impressions, some more concrete than others, that I collect as I am reading her' (p. 6). DiBattista asserts that she is as much the producer of Woolf here as Woolf is of her literary self, and the product is, unlike the versioning that Silver describes, the product of a single reader. Where Woolf writes herself into her work, DiBattista *reads* herself into Woolf's work, thereby adding an additional layer of interpretation to the text. As DiBattista explains: 'we might see the various figments of the reader's — in this case my — imagination on display' (p. 35). In conversational terms, *Imagining Virginia Woolf* exists more as a two-way exchange between the reader and the text, rather than the multi-vocal dialogue presented in *Virginia Woolf Icon*.

Her reading is also the product of an ongoing process, presented in a manner reminiscent of the way in which Woolf presents her essay 'Women and Fiction' as it unfolds in 'A Room of One's Own'. For as long as DiBattista keeps reading, she also keeps producing her 'figment' of Woolf. The use of the present continuous tense in the title of DiBattista's study *Imagining Virginia Woolf* reflects this sense of perpetuity. As such, it marks both a departure from Silver's 'versioning' and a return to methods of 'reading' an author that Woolf herself endorsed in the first half of the twentieth century: it is a progression in its focus on the subject's writing, and a return in the way that DiBattista reiterates Woolf's own reading methods. Inspired by her subject, DiBattista both acknowledges and participates in a creative process, in which she continues to imagine Woolf's already-constructed self. She states that: 'It is Woolf who makes things up, who makes *herself* up — that is what it means, at a very fundamental level, to have an imagination and to use it in your writing' (p. 6, original emphasis). We can see this in practice when Woolf constructs the different narrating personas in 'A Room of One's Own'. DiBattista becomes involved in the Woolfian

self-consciousness that implicates the author in the production of a text, but the product of DiBattista's reading can only ever be a reinterpretation of a subject who has already promoted a self-conscious process of textual invention.

In Woolf's account of her visit to Shakespeare's birthplace (discussed in the previous chapter), she states that the best way to 'know' a writer is through his or her writing. This brief diary entry on her visit to Stratford-upon-Avon encourages a reading of the writing subject that focuses on the literary text rather than the biographical life. DiBattista echoes this sentiment when she states her wish to identify a figment of the author 'who exists only intermittently in the pages of her writing' (p. 8). However, rather than capitalising on Woolf's own methods of reading a writer through his or her text, she looks to the French poststructuralist theorist Barthes for ways of reading the author through the writing. She states how she is

interested, like Barthes, in the author who leaves his text and comes into our life. I share Barthes's view that this author has no unity but appears to us as a plural and often discontinuous being [...] the body of the author who comes into our life is a figment with distinguishing features and characteristics that produce in our mind's eye that mirage called personality. The author is a plural being. (p. 8)

DiBattista repeatedly refers to her 'figment' of Woolf as manifold; it has 'no unity', is 'plural and often discontinuous' as well as a 'plural being.' Her practice of identifying this 'figment' involves the production of many 'Woolfs' by a single reader, rather than an accumulation of individual versions in which she is reduced to a single image. The reader's capacity to imagine the multiple subject marks another difference that exists between Silver's process of 'versioning' and DiBattista's practice of reading, in which the evolution of the subject can be encompassed in a single response rather than across a field of biographical or critical studies. The figment that emerges from her reading of Woolf 'identifies the most dominant of

Woolf's various personalities', which she lists as: the Sybil of the Drawing Room, The Author, The Critic, The World Writer, and The Adventurer (p. 13). At the same time, DiBattista explains that she 'can confidently identify and describe only five of them' (p. 13), suggesting that perhaps more are yet to be discovered. *Imagining Virginia Woolf* conveys a contention within DiBattista's reading, which swings between creativity and control.

The multiple Woolf 'figments' identified are initially embraced by DiBattista, as she states that:

The author is a plural being, then, but her plurality is not exhausted by her charms or amiabilities; it extends to her ability to imagine herself not as a single person, but as many persons; not as one body, but as anybody, somebody, even nobody. (p. 13)

However, the language adopted later in *Imagining Virginia Woolf* sees DiBattista attempting to control this plurality in her reading of Woolf. She refers to the experience of reading an author with whose work she is already familiar: 'what we think we know is an image of our own creation, a portrait in which all the various faces we have glimpsed, all the many intonations we have heard, are harmonised into a single impression' (p. 34). Despite her earlier emphasis upon the 'figment of the author' as a multiple and fluid self, attempts are still made to reduce these to a 'single impression'. She describes her task as 'an attempt to portray the person captured in the writing itself' (p. 9), and it is this sense of the text having the power to 'catch' or 'hold' her impressions that works against a more fluid process of reading that she claims to adopt.

DiBattista's strategy in *Imagining Virginia Woolf* marks a return to the human impulse that Woolf also recognised in her own writing. She remarks that it is only natural for a reader to feel the need to know the personal thoughts and opinions of a

writer: 'We want, even yearn, to know who the author is and what he or she thinks about things' (p. 4), DiBattista exclaims. In her essay 'Reading' (1919), Woolf declares that: 'Somewhere, everywhere, now hidden, now apparent in whatever is written down is the form of a human being',¹⁹ a sentiment that she elaborates on in an early book review, 'Sterne' (1909).²⁰ In a sense, DiBattista overcomes the vast body of biographical portraits of Woolf by creating the form of the critical biography, but perhaps a new form is not required for this purpose after all. A return to something already created, such as Woolf's own thoughts on this impression of the writer perceived through the writing, will also offer a movement forwards to provide possible ways of imagining the future of Woolf as a biographical subject.

An early example of Woolf 'reading' an author solely through his or her writing can be found in 'Sterne', written as a review of a biography of Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Times of Laurence Sterne* (1909) by Wilbur L. Cross. Appearing six years prior to the publication of her first novel *The Voyage Out*, the timing of this essay is demonstrative of how early Woolf began making these connections between the biographical life and the writing, connections that influence the work that she produced throughout the rest of her career. She remarks upon the inadequacy of conventional biography as a product of the biographers' continued determination to separate the writing from the biographical life of his or her subject. In 'Sterne', Woolf argues that the most intimate connection that can be established between an author and their reader will be established by reading his or her writing. The familiarity that Woolf encourages the reader to achieve is an impression developed through a reading

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Reading', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume 3: 1919-1924*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie ([1919] London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1991), pp. 141-61 (p. 156).

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'Sterne' in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays* ([1909] London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1975), pp. 167-75 (p. 167). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

of the subject's writing, a process that provides a greater intimacy than through simply knowing the biographical facts of his or her life. As she explains:

It is the custom to draw a distinction between a man and his works and to add that, although the world has a claim to read every line of his writing, it must not ask questions about the author. The distinction has arisen, we may believe, because the art of biography has fallen very low, and people of good taste infer that a 'life' will merely gratify a base curiosity.²¹

Woolf does not try to sever the life from the writing as DiBattista does in *Imagining Virginia Woolf*, but remarks that such a dichotomous reading strategy 'implies some loss' (p. 167) because, as she goes on to argue, the life and the writing are so inherently and inextricably intertwined. It is for this reason that she condemns Cross for 'not going to pass judgement on the writings, but merely to give the facts of the life' (p. 169). To read a writer's work is, she states, to understand not only the text itself but also an integral component of the writer's experience:

A writer is a writer from his cradle; in his dealings with the world, in his affections, in his attitude to the thousand small things that happen between dawn and sunset, he shows the same point of view as that which he elaborates afterwards with a pen in his hand. It is more fragmentary and incoherent, but it is also more intense. (p. 167)

Two significant points are made apparent in the above quotation. Firstly, by suggesting that the writer is evident in everything that he or she writes, Woolf also draws herself into the frame of her essay. It is no coincidence that the subject of this particular book review is Laurence Sterne, the author *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767), one of the earliest examples of the metafictional novel in British literature. As a result, two highly self-conscious authors are presented in the essay; 'Sterne' is no longer simply about one author, but

²¹ Woolf, 'Sterne', p. 167.

two. Secondly, like Silver and DiBattista after her, Woolf observes that this impression of the author formed through such a reading of the work is both more fragmentary and incoherent than the conventional biographical form accepts. While it may not present the impression of a whole subject, the effect that it has upon the reader may be more profound, and it is this point that Woolf most clearly asserts in her essay.

Another distinct characteristic of Woolf's essay is the extent to which she blends literary genres in her treatment of the subject. She combines literary criticism, biography and fiction in what began life as a book review. Woolf announces that:

A certain stigma is attached to the biography which deals mainly with a man's personal history, and the writer who sees him most clearly in that light is driven to represent him under the cover of fiction. The fascination of novel writing lies in its freedom; the dull parts can be skipped, and the excitements intensified; but above all the character can be placed artistically, set, that is, in fitting surroundings and composed so as to give whatever impression you choose. (p. 168)

This is exactly what Woolf does here with both her and Cross's portrait of Sterne; she plays on the self-consciousness of her writing subject, continually returning to the writer and the process of literary creativity. Details of Sterne's parentage, childhood and education are condensed into a short page of comic scenes, only drawing attention to them for their potential for fictional treatment. Yet it is the figure of Sterne himself, and his role as a writer, that becomes the greatest focus of Woolf's attention. Following her subject's example, she presents her own imaginative impression of him: 'The first books of *Tristram Shandy* were written at fever heat, "quaint demons grinning and clawing at his head", ideas striking him as he walked, and sending him back home at a run to secure them' (p. 171). It is not clear where Woolf draws this dramatic scene of literary creativity from; whether from Cross's

biography, Sterne's fiction or her own invention. Yet this is part of the point that Woolf makes in her essay. She offers a possible answer to this question later in 'Sterne' when she reaffirms the inherent connection between the figure writing and the literary product: 'Sterne himself, no doubt, scarcely knew at what point his own pain was dissolved in the joy of an artist. We at this distance of time, might speculate indefinitely' (p. 174). Here Woolf responds to Sterne's writerly experience by imagining her own, thereby creating a dialogue between the two and their respective writing experiences. Sterne's presence is pictured in this scene, whereas Woolf's presence as the creator of this scene is implied: the image of the writer is therefore doubled in this scene of writing. Her depiction of Sterne racing home to put his ideas onto paper might just be the object of fictional embellishment, and the reader is left to ponder this possibility after reading the rest of the essay. By closing it with a portrait of her subject sat writing at his desk, Woolf provides a reminder about the creativity of the literary artist. She describes how he

could sit at his table, arranging and rearranging, adding and altering, until every scene was clear, every tone was felt, and each word was fit and in its place. "How do the slight touches of the chisel", he exclaimed in *Tristram Shandy*, "the pencil, the pen, the fiddlestick, etcetera, give the true swell, which gives the true pleasure!" (p. 175)

Her final image of Sterne is merged with Sterne's own fictional portrait of himself in *Tristram Shandy*, through which Woolf's impression speaks to Sterne's own through a lively conversation between their respective fiction, and which lies at the centre of Woolf's essay.

Innovations in life writing exemplified by the work of Virginia Woolf at the beginning of the twentieth century reveal the simultaneous 'absence-presence' not only of the biographical subject, but also of the writing figure. The plurality of the

self, the construction of the self as an ongoing project, and the hybridity of the biographical form are all qualities articulated through Woolf's writing. For a writer who has repeatedly held a looking-glass to her herself and her own position as a writer, it is only appropriate — if not inevitable — that contemporary novelists are now holding a mirror to Woolf as the biographical subject, and the subject of such fictional treatment. It is no coincidence that Hermione Lee frames her 1996 biography *Virginia Woolf* with an opening chapter 'Biography' that self-consciously explores her experience of writing about Woolf, and a closing chapter 'Biographer', in which she reflects upon her own life and the experiences shared with her subject. This self-awareness, plurality and transparency regarding the writing process must be advanced beyond the confines of the conventional biographical form, to adopt a more flexible shape that allows scope for this simultaneous production of reading and writing in the creation of the writing subject. Maria DiBattista moves closer to Woolf's own practices in her perception of the 'figment' of the author in *Imagining Virginia Woolf*, yet the simultaneous process of reading and writing are shared between DiBattista and her subject: she asserts her role as the reader in this project, while Woolf remains the writer.

The question of how to translate Woolf the writer into the Woolf the subject remains. Both *The Hours* and *Vanessa and Virginia* respond to this problem through a shared interest in artistry, and by addressing the symbiotic relationship between interpretation and creation within the textual form. As a result, both biographical novels expose the mechanics of composition, *The Hours* drawing attention to reading alongside writing, while in *Vanessa and Virginia* Sellers includes the process of painting to this artistic exchange. The readings of these novels that ensue will take into account the respective compositional approaches, and the effect that they have

upon their respective representations of Virginia Woolf initially articulated through Woolf's own writing.

When Hermione Lee considers Virginia Woolf as a biographical subject, she highlights the difficulty of capturing the many different 'Woolfs' in one biographical study. Brenda Silver emphasises the extent to which Woolf has been reduced to a visual and verbal image; albeit one that highlights the multiplicity and fluidity that Woolf herself conveyed through her own writing. Where Silver removes Woolf from the writerly, Maria DiBattista draws her back within a literary context, and she does so by embracing typically Woolfian techniques in order to produce her 'figment', including herself in the impressions she presents. The product of a symbiotic process of reading and interpretation, it is after all the complimentary and evolving processes of creation and interpretation that lie at the heart of Woolf's own portraits of writers. The question that Woolf poses in her writing, and the possible answers that she offers, provide a solid foundation upon which to begin considering how Woolf herself can become the focus not simply as the writer, but also the subject of such biographical attention and fictional treatment. Woolf achieves this dual effect of interpretation and creation in 'A Room of One's Own' when she projects the multiple writing personas at the same time that she is openly composing her essay 'Women and Fiction,' and again in 'Sterne', when she writes herself into the text as its creator at the same time that she constructs the portrait of her subject. Woolf's technique involves the mutual creation of the artist-figure within his or her art form, and what is therefore required for a biographical consideration of Woolf herself is a textual form that allows scope for this simultaneous production of reading and writing in the creation of the author-figure within a single text. To produce a truly 'Woolfian' Woolf, one must combine more transparent processes of creation and interpretation

in their portrait, which itself requires the use of fiction. This demand speaks directly to the writing of Roland Barthes, as it seeks to reinstate the author as the creator of and in a text — one that Woolf herself exercised as a modernist life-writer — and as such blurs the boundaries between the biographical life and the written text. By exposing more of the mechanics behind a text, and therefore the function of the author as the simultaneous creator and reader of a biographical subject (more than simply a 'paper-author', the author-biographer writes themselves into the text through the perpetual process of creativity. The biographical novels *The Hours* and *Vanessa and Virginia* by Michael Cunningham and Susan Sellers both respond to this need through a shared interest in artistry (literary and visual respectively) by addressing the simultaneous motifs of interpretation and creation within the textual form. By their very nature as works of fiction, they draw upon their own status as re-readings and rewritings of their subject and her art.

4.2. The Visual Biographer

The process of literary creation is interpreted and explored across the three distinct narrative threads that make up Cunningham's *The Hours*, all of which are united by Woolf's own novel *Mrs Dalloway*. *The Hours* acknowledges the many ways of reading its subject, and it is through these narrative strands that Woolf and her writing are together read in three different ways: by the 1940s Los Angeles housewife Laura Brown who is reading *Mrs Dalloway*; by fictionalising a day in Woolf's life in 1920s Richmond on which we see her beginning to write *Mrs Dalloway*; and finally through the appropriation of *Mrs Dalloway* in which

Cunningham transfers and translates the characters and events of London in the 1920s to New York City in the late 1990s. *The Hours* is not a direct appropriation of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, but instead provides the central referent through which the three narrative strands cohere, as well as certain motifs that become echoed throughout Cunningham's novel. It is at once a rereading and a rewriting of Woolf's original novel, as well as a rereading and a rewriting of Woolf's life.

In *Vanessa and Virginia*, Sellers explicitly addresses the connection between biography and art through her decision to convey the narrative from the perspective of a fictionalised Vanessa Bell and her own role as a painter. Like *The Hours*, Sellers's novel responds to another of Woolf's texts, but is more discreetly addressed in *Vanessa and Virginia*. The novel responds to Woolf's memoir 'Reminiscences', in which she writes about her sister Vanessa in a piece that is addressed to Bell's (then unborn) son Julian. In Sellers's novel it is Vanessa who narrates her version of Woolf through the eyes of a visual artist, and a textual interpretation of the process of painting. It is through this sibling partnership that Sellers explores the connection between writing and painting in relation to the construction of the literary portrait.

The personal and professional closeness of the sisters Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell is already well documented, not least by Diane Filby Gillespie in *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (1988). In this study Gillespie draws distinct parallels between Woolf's written and Bell's painted portraits of their subjects and, more specifically, that 'Both sisters, in fact, create portraits of artists'.²² More significantly, they reciprocate and mirror each other's art through portraits of one another, most notably in the painter Lily Briscoe in *To The Lighthouse* by Woolf, and in a series of portraits of Woolf by Bell

²² Diane Filby Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts: The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* ([1988] New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 163.

(discussed later in this chapter). My aim here is not to offer comment on Bell's paintings (this I reserve for the many art historians who have already done so), but rather to explore the textual effect of writing about painting, alongside the complementary process of writing about writing.

As Gillespie observes, both Bell and Woolf address the issue of representing a life in their chosen arts. Both involve a continuous negotiation between 'likeness' and 'character' or, to use Woolf's own analogy from 'The New Biography' (discussed in my Introduction), the tussle between 'granite and rainbow':

The question of superficial likeness as opposed to true character dominated Vanessa Bell's reactions to the portraits she painted during the second and third decades of the century, just as it preoccupied Woolf's thoughts about people in general as well as biography and fiction during the same period.²³

Vanessa and Virginia engages with questions relating to life writing, as outlined by Woolf at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sellers's use of Vanessa Bell as the narrator does not detract from Woolf's theories of life writing, but rather directly addresses some of the approaches that Woolf herself took to producing and reviewing the literary form. Vanessa Bell's portraiture can be considered equally relevant to discussions of biography, as counterparts to Woolf's literary portraits. Woolf wrote repeatedly about the visual arts as an aide to writing a life, to which she provides a more sustained examination of the role of the painter as biographer in 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation' (1934). Fourteen years earlier, Woolf describes the painterly as offering qualities better suited to writing a life. In her essay 'Pictures and Portraits' (1920) she refers to writing as the weaker of the arts, when describing an exhibition of portraits by the caricaturist Edmond Kapp: 'But words, words! How

²³ Gillespie, p. 167.

inadequate you are! How weary one gets of you! How you will always be saying too much or too little! Oh to be silent! Oh to be a painter! Oh (in short) to be Mr Kapp!'.²⁴ As the title of Woolf's essay 'Walter Sickert: A Conversation' suggests, she presents her argument by adopting the various voices and thoughts of different characters, through whom she narrates differing viewpoints. Speaking through one of her fictional dinner party guests, she explains why an artist such as Sickert is such a successful biographer:

I repeat, said one of them, that Sickert is among the best of biographers. When he sits a man or woman down in front of him he sees the whole of the life that has been lived to make that face. There it is — stated. None of our biographies make such complete and flawless statements. They are tripped up by those miserable impediments called facts.²⁵

Once again, Woolf adopts the verbal and the visual that Silver considers to be central to formations of the Virginia Woolf 'icon' regarded here as a way of exploring the biographical life; one of the dinner party group 'said', while Sickert 'sees' his subject. To present the whole of a biographical life requires a level of creativity and flexibility not permitted within the conventions of documentary biography. How then (Woolf must consider), can the passing of time be communicated through the literary form? Another of Woolf's guests argues that these qualities render Sickert 'more of a novelist than a biographer [...] He likes to set his characters in motion, to watch them in action' (p. 13); and by doing so Woolf outlines once again the incompatibility that exists between the recording of facts and the creativity required to express a subject's life. This discrepancy between the written and the painted life does not achieve a resolution in 'Walter Sickert', but rather Woolf highlights how she borrows

²⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Pictures and Portraits' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume 3: 1919-1924*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie ([1920] London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1988), pp. 163-65 (p. 166).

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* (London: Hogarth Press, 1934), p. 12. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

the conventions of other artistic forms (writing this essay as a conversation or short story) in order to articulate how painters such as Sickert also borrow the artistic modes of others. She declares that

Among the many kinds of artists, it may be that there are some who are hybrid. Some, that is to say, bore deeper and deeper into the stuff of their own art; others are always making raids into the lands of others. Sickert it may be is among the hybrids, the raiders. (p. 27)

For a writer such as Woolf, whose approach to writing involves exactly this adoption of the hybrid form, she returns to this idea of 'raiding' the visual arts later on in her career. Although she declares that painting and writing 'must part in the end' (p. 22) towards the conclusion of 'Walter Sickert', they are once again reunited when she begins to think about writing the biography of her friend and painter Roger Fry in the late 1930s. It is not simply another art that Woolf raids but that of both of her sister and of her biographical subject, as she admits in a letter to her sister Vanessa regarding the difficulties she experiences in undertaking the project.

It is no coincidence to discover, for example, that Woolf visualises the process of writing *Roger Fry* (1940) — the only non-fiction biography that she published — by adopting the language of a painter. In the letter to Bell she writes:

how am I to write this book? [...] Its [*sic*] rather as if you had to paint a portrait using dozens of snapshots in the paint. Either one ought to dash it off freehand, red, green, purple out of ones [*sic*] inner eye; or toil like a fly over a loaf of bread. As it is I'm compromising; and its a muddle; and unreadable; and will have to be used [...] to wipe a geese's rump. But Roger himself is so magnificent, I'm so in love with him; and see dimly such a masterpiece that cant [*sic*] be painted, that on I go.²⁶

²⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume 6: 1936-1941*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 284 (08 October 1938).

Woolf immediately refers to her task in terms of another, alluding to her sister's art rather than her own in its composition. She also touches upon the discrepancy that exists between the fluidity of the life and the static nature of the text, and draws upon visual allusions to describe her aspirations for life writing when she refers to the 'dozens of snapshots in the paint.' Yet the painterly remains only an aspiration for Woolf, rather than a realistic means through which her portrait of Fry can be conceived, as she concedes that for her it is something that 'can't be painted'. Once again, she draws upon the rainbow of fiction through the shots of colour 'red, green, purple' contrasted against the 'toil' and detail of fact represented by the loaf of bread. She also wishes for her biography of Fry to provide a bridge between the imaginary biography seen through the imagination of 'one's inner eye' and the 'toil' of fact (using a variation on her famous 'granite and rainbow' analogy described in the introductory chapter of this thesis), but in this example, the visual and the textual remain incompatible; it is a combination that remains unrealised for Woolf.

Woolf also turned her attention to writing her own memoirs in 'Sketch of the Past' in 1939, shortly after writing her biography of Roger Fry. In the first entry she writes for this later piece, she once again likens her task as an autobiographer to that of a visual artist. Remarking on trying to describe her first memories, she exclaims: 'If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green.'²⁷ The inadequacy of the written word for such purposes is again implied in Woolf's account, instead favouring a series of strong visual impressions in conveying these early memories.

When Woolf does write about her sister Vanessa, she does so using the form of a joint memoir of the Stephen family, written between 1907 and 1908 when Bell

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past' in *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind ([1976] New York: Harvest, 2002), pp. 78-160 (p. 79).

was pregnant with her first child Julian. This memoir was only published posthumously under the title 'Reminiscences' in *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing* (1976). Woolf begins the memoir to her then unborn nephew by stating that 'Your mother was born in 1879', and in doing so identifies both her biographical subject as well as her intended audience.²⁸ 'Reminiscences' was not written for publication, but rather as a private document to be read primarily by Julian Bell. By addressing this account to a child not yet born, Woolf creates a form of life-writing that reflects the importance of future generations of her family, as well as those from her present and past. This connection between the past, present and future also asserts a relationship between the author, subject and reader that transgresses these temporal boundaries.

As a joint family memoir, 'Reminiscences' does not focus solely on Vanessa as the biographical subject, but considers the influence of other members of the Stephen family on the development of Vanessa as the eventual emergent central figure. As part of this portrait, Woolf describes the feeling she experiences when she tries to visualise her sister for her nephew:

When I try to see her I see more distinctly how our lives are pieces in a pattern and to judge one truly you must consider how this side is squeezed and that indented and a third expanded and none are really isolated, and so I conceive that there were many reasons then to make your mother show herself a little other than she was. (p. 3)

Woolf adopts more visual language when she acknowledges how the written biographical life is not coherent, but exists as 'pieces in a pattern'. She likens the process of squeezing, indenting and expanding Bell's image to a caricaturist's sketch,

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Reminiscences' in *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind ([1976] New York: Harvest, 2002), pp. 1-30 (p. 1). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

producing an exaggerated, shapeshifting figure that alters to accommodate the other members of the family. Demonstrating an early example of what Paul John Eakin was to describe decades later as the 'relational' self,²⁹ the focus of Woolf's attention then shifts from her sister to her mother Julia Stephen, to their father Leslie Stephen, then on to their half-sister Stella Duckworth before returning to Bell as the emergent nucleus of her family portrait. Towards the end of the memoir, Woolf exclaims: 'It generally happens in seasons of such bewilderment as that in which we found ourselves, that one person becomes immediately the central figure, as it were, the solid figure, and on this occasion it was your mother' (p. 25). She declares that in order to look at a single biographical subject one also draws the lives of others into the frame; we see the movement of Bell from the centre to the periphery before returning once more to the focus of Woolf's attention. She begins by attempting to illustrate the first years of Bell's life, but concedes that this can only be conceived in relation to her own life. She remarks: 'as some six years at least must have passed before I knew that she was my sister, I can say nothing of that time' (p. 1). To illustrate the first six years of Bell's life, Woolf directs her attention to a photograph of her sister in order to better describe what she was like as a young child. As Woolf admits the inadequacy of memory in her quest to write her sister's biographical portrait, she looks to the visual arts to fulfil this task, just as she describes her biography of Fry in the letter to her sister. It is this exploration of the visual conveyed through the textual form that not only characterises Woolf's portrait of Bell, but again hints at Bell's life and career as a visual artist.

Woolf first directs the unborn Julian's attention to a photograph of his mother to provide a physical description of Bell. She writes:

²⁹ Eakin, p. 43.

A photograph is the best token there is of her appearance, and the face in this instance shows also much of the character. You see the soft, dreamy and almost melancholy expression of the eyes; and it may not be fanciful to discover some kind of test and rejection in them as though, even then, she considered the thing she saw, and did not always find what she needed in it. (p. 1)

Here, Woolf teases Julian with hints at what the photograph at once reveals and conceals. Although Woolf initially suggests that the photograph in question offers a representation of Bell's physical appearance as a child, she then concedes that the photograph can offer little insight into Bell's character. Conversely, it is Bell's facial expression that divulges the most and at the same time the least, in this memoir. The photograph cannot after all be reproduced in the text but merely translated through words, so the reader is reliant upon Woolf's reading of and response to the image. She capitalises on the literary imagination to create a textual portrait of Bell, and succeeds in imagining a story to explain the static image for her nephew, the intended reader of this memoir. Ironically, the subject of Woolf's gaze is the subject of Bell's observation; she observes how Vanessa 'considered the thing she saw, and did not always find what she needed in it.' It is not clear who or what Bell is observing in this photograph, but she suggests that whatever is being looked at is something beyond of the gaze of the photographer. Bell's expression therefore does more to deflect the focus away from her subject than it offers any detail about her. At the same time, Woolf draws attention to Julian's role in the reading process when she insists that: 'you see the soft, dreamy and almost melancholy expression of the eyes' but subsequently suggests that Vanessa's expression is in some way a response to what she gazes upon. In 'Reminiscences', a deferral of attention occurs when Bell's gaze directs the viewer away from a focus on her face. Having established that the photograph does not provide any answers to the questions she asks herself, Woolf

then shifts her attention to the perspective of her subject. She tries to imagine how Bell sees herself through her role as a professional painter, just as she does when writing to Bell of her biography of Roger Fry:

She was a happy creature! beginning to feel within her the spring of unsuspected gifts, that the sea was beautiful and might be painted someday, and perhaps once or twice she looked steadily in the glass when no one was by and saw a face that excited her strangely; her being began to have a definite shape, a place in the world — what was it like? (p. 4)

The suggested movement of the sea and the implied image reflected in the glass both contrast with the static photographic image in the previous quotation. Bell's talent for painting is referred to as a 'spring', a small detail that also perpetuates the sense of motion in Woolf's portrait. Juxtaposed with these fluid images is one of Bell looking 'steadily in the glass', but its stability is undermined by the ambiguity of exactly what it is that she gazes upon. The introduction of the glass opens up opportunities for two-way images or reflections of their subject. It remains unclear if the face 'that excited her strangely' is Bell's own, or if it belongs to another subject: Woolf avoids providing details of the perceived reflection. The clarity of the 'definite shape' is contradicted by the uncertainty of his or her identity. The reader is led from an assumed portrait of Bell, to one of anonymity; fluid and ever-changing.

In *Vanessa and Virginia*, Sellers focusses on the question of portraiture that Woolf addresses in her own musings on biography. Here, Sellers addresses more specifically the medium of painting (an art that remains visibly absent in 'Reminiscences'), and the dynamic between the subject and the artist. Like Sickert, Sellers becomes in Woolf's terms a 'hybrid' and a 'raider' of both the sisters' arts, as she portrays the life of the writer through the eyes of a painter. When we see these representations of painting through the medium of writing, what becomes evident is

that these are not based upon a hierarchy of writing versus painting, but upon a balanced dialogue between the two arts.

4.3 Painting Woolf in *Vanessa and Virginia*

When Susan Sellers explains her motives for writing *Vanessa and Virginia* in her online blog, she describes how the theme of sibling rivalry provided the initial inspiration for the novel: she admits that she 'didn't set out to write a novel about Virginia Woolf'.³⁰ This moment of inspiration echoes that of David Lodge, whose initial 'germ' of an idea for *Author, Author* was borne out of the friendship between the two writers Henry James and George du Maurier. *Vanessa and Virginia* is a novel about the relationship between the two sisters but, more specifically, and certainly as significantly, it is about the relationship between their arts. As the doubling of its subjects suggests, the dynamics here imply a kind of exchange or conversation between the two artists. Sellers partakes in this conversation when she asks herself: 'If Vanessa had written in anything like the detail Virginia did, what would her story have been?' (para. 2 of 12). Through her use of the second-person pronoun as a way of addressing Virginia, Sellers's novel speaks to Woolf's memoir 'Reminiscences' in its address to Julian Bell. The roles of writer and artist are reversed, as Sellers explores how to write the life of a writer from the perspective of a painter. Sellers joins the conversation, much like the dinner party guests join the debate about Walter Sickert and his status as a visual biographer.

³⁰ Susan Sellers, 'Writing *Vanessa and Virginia*', *Susan Sellers Weblog* <<http://susansellers.wordpress.com/interviews-and-articles/>> [accessed 12 September 2013] (para. 1 of 12). Further references are to this website and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

In her blog, Sellers explains how an absence of written material by Bell required a process of translating visual media into the textual. She writes: 'We may not have many of Vanessa's words, but what we do have are her paintings. I realised that if I wanted to get to know Vanessa as a character, I would have to do so from this perspective' (para. 4 of 12). This process is central to my reading of *Vanessa and Virginia*, as I demonstrate later in the chapter. While Woolf begins to intimate that painting is the superior art for portraying the 'life' in 'Reminiscences', Sellers responds here by translating Bell's visual portraits into the textual. By describing her own role as an author, Sellers more closely echoes the words of Woolf when she writes of composing her biography *Roger Fry* in her letter to Bell. Sellers describes her role as an author using the vocabulary of a painter; instead of evoking images of pens, paper and ink, she describes a need to adopt 'a painter's voice' (para. 4 of 12). She adds that to convey these effects, she 'needed a novelist's palette: I gave myself permission to select, stage and heighten; I used metaphor, not fact' (para. 4 of 12). If we compare these words to those of Woolf, in which she tries to balance the 'red, green, purple out of ones inner eye' against the 'toil like a fly over a loaf of bread' in her attempts to write her biography of Fry, one can see Sellers echoing this sentiment in her own writing. Here Sellers continues in Woolf's endeavours to marry the qualities of painting to the art of writing, achieving a portrait of both Woolf and Bell that prioritises artistic creativity over an obligation for biographical accuracy.

Sellers draws distinctions between photography and painting, and biography and fiction — a strategy that echoes Woolf's own approach to the connection between biography and the visual arts, as expressed in her memoir 'Reminiscences'. Sellers writes of *Vanessa and Virginia*:

I imagine the differences between straight biography and what I have done to the sisters' story are similar to those between a photograph and a painting: where the photographer aims for a true likeness, the painter offers an individual view — refocusing, highlighting, and sometimes adding lines or colours that are not in the original but which the composition appears to call for. (para. 9 of 12)

The distinctions that Woolf outlines through her description of Bell's photograph at the beginning of 'Reminiscences' make subtly different points regarding the function of the two visual media. Woolf claims that the difficulty lies more in the photograph's inability to reveal enough about its subject. Woolf questions exactly what it is that remains the object of her attention: her sister, or the unknown person or object that she gazes upon. Sellers demonstrates a greater reliance upon a photograph's ability to express a 'true' likeness of its subject. In contrast, painting does not provide an accurate art, but a more creative form of expression. It is through these co-ordinates that Sellers negotiates a space for *Vanessa and Virginia*, as a self-consciously subjective reading of the lives of Bell and Woolf. As such, it advances the relationship between painting and life writing that Woolf herself instigated in the early twentieth century. Sellers goes further yet in forging connections between her work and that of both Bell and Woolf when she imagines herself as one of Woolf's fictional characters. She writes:

Virginia Woolf's novel *To The Lighthouse* culminates with one of the characters, a painter Lily Briscoe, finishing a picture by drawing a single line down its centre. It is a powerful climax because Lily (whom many critics believe is based on Vanessa) has been struggling with this painting for years [...] she experiences a moment of epiphany as she realises she has succeeded in portraying her vision. My own feelings on finishing *Vanessa and Virginia* are similar. (para. 12 of 12)

By comparing her own experience of writing to that of Woolf's fictional character, Sellers places herself again within a space that occupies both fiction and biography.

Her allusions to the fictional are expressed through her reference to Woolf's character Lily, yet the connections also made to Bell complicate the stance that Sellers takes in the composition of her novel. If Lily is considered in some way to be Woolf's fictional representation of her sister, here we see Bell viewed through the eyes of Woolf, then perceived through those of Sellers. I will show how the processes of reading, writing and painting all marry together to create a portrait of Woolf the writer. My own reading of *Vanessa and Virginia* identifies the multiple layers of interpretation evident in Sellers's novel.

The poststructuralist feminist and author Hélène Cixous addresses the relationship between writing and painting in her essay 'The Last Painting or the Portrait of God' (1991), thereby revisiting some of the questions first set out by Virginia Woolf decades earlier. A prolific translator and editor of Cixous's work (including 'The Last Painting') as well as an editor and critic of Woolf, Susan Sellers can be seen to forge closer connections between the work of these two authors through her own literary endeavours. Just as we have seen in the cases of Plath and James in the preceding chapters (through Kristeva and Cixous's reading of the uncanny), post-structuralist theory can once again be appropriated as a way of overthrowing its rejection of the author, as the ensuing analysis of Cixous's theory will outline. My reading of Sellers's novel through a third poststructuralist lens will reveal a literary approach in favour of the humanist assertion of the author-figure as it is constructed in the contemporary biographical novel. By adopting Vanessa Bell as a conduit through whom to channel her representation of Woolf in *Vanessa and Virginia*, Sellers offers a new perspective on writing the life of both sisters, one that engages with the task in a way that Woolf might have pursued herself. More specifically, Bell's painter voice provides a new contribution to this ongoing process

of writing a perpetually evolving life of Virginia Woolf. Writing *Vanessa and Virginia*, Sellers's novel seems to speak to both Cixous's essay, as well as to the recent cultural manifestations of Woolf, produced in the various different visual media.

In 'The Last Painting', Cixous considers the relationship between the production of both writing and painting, and the subsequent reception of both of these art forms. She opens her essay with a statement of intention that progresses those outlined by Woolf on writing *Roger Fry*: 'I would like to write like a painter. I would like to write like painting [...] in the present absolute'.³¹ She likens her wish to write to the act of 'painting' with an emphasis upon the present continuous tense. In the next remark, Cixous refers to the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector, but she could equally be describing Sellers's practice in composing *Vanessa and Virginia*, when she writes of: 'a book from which each page could be taken out like a picture' (p. 105). While Cixous's essay does not directly address issues of life-writing as initially outlined by Woolf, the connection that she forges between the two arts progresses and expands upon much of what Woolf herself instigated, and which here lend themselves well to Woolf's theory of life-writing. It is by presenting a series of vignettes and snapshots in her novel that Sellers also approaches the task of life-writing, and takes this further still when she portrays Bell in the process of painting her portraits of Woolf.

According to Cixous, expression through writing should convey the experience of living for the writer: 'This is how I live, this is how I try to write' (p. 104). The painter, on the other hand, occupies a privileged position in his or her

³¹ Hélène Cixous, 'The Last Painting or the Portrait of God' in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. by Deborah Jenson, trans. by Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle and Susan Sellers (London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 104-31 (p. 104). Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

ability to capture the instant. Woolf repeatedly remarks upon this disparity and the difficulty it poses in accurately conveying the experience of life as it is lived. She stresses a desire to capture 'dozens of snapshots in the paint' when she writes to Bell about her biography *Roger Fry*.³² Echoing Woolf's lament about the writing of this biography, Cixous exclaims that: 'we are so slow. Life is so rapid [...] We who write are so slow. And I think of the painter's magic swiftness' (p. 111). It is an issue that Susan Sellers also responds to in *Vanessa and Virginia* with the compilation of vignettes and depictions of Bell painting from which the novel is constructed. In her essay, Cixous offers a vivid description of the effect created by reading visual imagery through writing, noting that, as a writer: 'What I can tell you, a painter would show you' (p. 105). Her description of the painter's role at the same time highlights that of the reader, and what she hopes to achieve through writing:

If I were a painter! I would give you each mimosa-cluster whole. I would give you my mimosa-soul, down to the most minute quivering of the yellow spheres [...] But I can't nourish your eyes with mimosa light. So I beg you: please, see the mimosas that I see. Imagine the mimosas. See what you don't see, out of love for me. (p. 107)

This opening exclamation is a direct echo of the words ('If I were a painter') that Woolf chooses in trying to capture her first memories in 'Sketch of the Past'.³³ Cixous also visualises the role of the writer as a painter: she adopts this visual imagery and concedes not the fallibility of the visual image, but rather the fluidity of its interpretation when rendered in writing. She admits that the picture that she imagines cannot be the same image that the reader conjures through its textual description, but her invitation to the reader in an open play of interpretation is an acknowledgement

³² Woolf, *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume 6*, p. 284.

³³ Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', p. 79.

and encouragement of the role of the reader. She uses an image of the mimosa flower in her example (adopted as a symbol to celebrate International Women's Day since the 1940s). She goes on to emphasise the reader's role:

I gather words to make a great straw-yellow fire, but if you don't put in your own flame, my fire won't take, my words won't burst into pale yellow sparks. My words will remain dead words. Without your breath on my words, there will be no mimosas. (p. 107)

As Cixous asserts, the disparity between the written word and the experience of reading requires the reader (or the 'demon of reading', to draw on Maria DiBattista's term) to give life to the writer's words, therefore bringing them to life in the present moment. For Susan Sellers, who renders Bell's portraits in writing and attempts to recapture moments of their composition, this process of interpretation introduces another layer of creativity that characterises her biographical novel. The translation of the textual description into a mental image leaves the novel increasingly open to interpretation. The aesthetic qualities of Bell's paintings are described in *Vanessa and Virginia*, but none are specifically identified by their titles. Portraits such as *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair* (1912) (to which I return at a later point), *Frederick and Jessie Etchells Painting* (1912) and *The Tub* (1917) are strongly suggested by Sellers' descriptions, but by not naming the specific works, she allows scope for further interpretation. Michael Whitworth observes a similar effect in reverse, as created in the television adaptation of Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. Referring to Colin Gregg's 1983 television adaptation of Woolf's novel, Whitworth comments on the translation of Lily Briscoe painting from the textual to a visual medium:

the novel gives only broad hints about the extent to which the painting is figurative or abstract, and leaves the reader imaginatively to complete it.

To present the painting on-screen is to reduce that range of possible images to one particular image.³⁴

It is not necessary to have a detailed knowledge of Bell's painting in order to appreciate *Vanessa and Virginia*; in fact, not knowing the specific pieces that Sellers alludes to provides an advantage in the sense that it opens up the play of interpretation further still.

Vanessa and Virginia presents Bell and the visual interpretation of her subjects, which Sellers translates back into the textual form of her novel, to be converted again into visual images in the reader's imagination. The experience of reading *Vanessa and Virginia* perpetuates the process of creativity at the centre of the novel, and the sense of evolution that Woolf believed to be integral to the biographical subject. In the words of Cixous, the reader also becomes a painter: 'I write. But I need the painter to give a face to my words. First of all, I write; then you must paint what I've said to you' (p. 108). Rather than the writer becoming a painter (as Woolf imagined in relation to her biography of Roger Fry) the responsibility now falls to the reader to realise this contemporary figuration of Woolf, just as Maria DiBattista asserts the role of the reader in the construction of the 'figment' of the author. As Hermione Lee has stated, it does not matter whether biographers, critics, and readers create differing portraits of Woolf: what is significant is that the portrait of the subject continues to alter and evolve. The different layers of reading presented in *Vanessa and Virginia*, involving the subject, author, and reader, encourage a more interactive reading of the novel.

Scenes of artistic creativity are presented from the beginning of *Vanessa and Virginia*. The novel opens with a young Vanessa Bell lying alongside her brother

³⁴ Michael Whitworth, 'Recontextualising and Reconstructing Woolf', in *Virginia Woolf (Authors in Context)* ([2005] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 192-226 (p. 200).

Thoby on the grass in their garden. Sellers describes what Bell sees: 'My eyes are open and I am watching the clouds, tracing giants, castles, fabulous winged beasts as they chase each other across the sky'.³⁵ It is a scene that evokes the moment in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in which Clarissa Dalloway and her fellow passers-by in St James's Park witness and attempt to decipher the vapour trails in the sky, created by an aeroplane flying overhead. Of this Woolf writes: 'There it was, coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky!'.³⁶ In Woolf's novel the passers-by each try to interpret the shapes that they see as coherent words and letters, but seen through Bell's eyes in *Vanessa and Virginia*, Sellers translates this into sky painting rather than sky writing, where Bell chooses to interpret the shapes in the sky as objects of fantasy. These images of 'giants, castles, fabulous winged beasts' suggest a momentary presence, as the clouds pass across the sky just as the smoke from the aeroplane will slowly disperse in front of its audience in *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf's first appearance in *Vanessa and Virginia* provides a contrasting image to that of the sky and clouds that Bell sees. She observes: 'A shadow falls. My angel disappears. I recognise your snake-green eyes' (p. 1). In the first description of Woolf in the novel it is Bell who becomes the object of scrutiny, as the two sisters can be seen here to be watching, and mirroring, one another. The shadow that Woolf's figure casts in this opening scene provides the outline of another figure alongside Bell and her brother, but this outline is dark, the figure a blank canvas for Bell. The image of sky painting returns again towards the close of the novel, in Bell's adulthood. Settled in Charleston farmhouse in East Sussex, Bell remarks: 'I look up and see the clouds

³⁵ Susan Sellers, *Vanessa and Virginia* (Ullapool: Two Ravens Press, 2008), p. 1. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

³⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* ([1925] London: Vintage, 2004), p. 16.

chasing each other against the blue. I try to trace the mythical beasts and castles I glimpsed in them as a child' (p. 104), and again at the very end of the novel, where the opening scene is repeated. Lying next to Thoby in their garden, Bell remarks: 'I feel soothed and comforted and as I gaze up at the clouds I spy angels' (p. 178). *Vanessa and Virginia* begins and ends with the same image of the clouds forming and moving across the sky, perpetuating the sense of movement, change and evolution that Woolf applies to her conception of the self. It is a comment on the fleeting nature of the present moment that is so hard to capture in writing, but much easier to achieve in the swift brushstrokes of a painter.

From the clouds and the sky, Sellers draws her reader back to the ground as she evokes Woolf's suicide in the River Ouse in Sussex in 1941; *Vanessa and Virginia's* final scene depicts Bell walking to the banks of the river with the manuscript of her story. Sellers adopts a metafictional device such as that used by Woolf in 'A Room of One's Own'. We witness Bell's manuscript for her story (presumably the text of *Vanessa and Virginia* that we read) enter the narrative, just as the blank pages of the essay 'Women and Fiction' are presented in the empty room of Woolf's essay. Where the pages of Woolf's essay remain blank, Bell's are written and erased by the water in the same way that Woolf's life is extinguished in the river:

I untie my parcel and dip the first sheet in the water. The words blur. I wait until the paper is soaked so that it will not be blown away by the wind, then let it go. The current snatches it from my fingers and rushes it downstream. I take the next page from the pile. When the last one has been released I make my dedication. This story is for you. (p. 181)

Sellers's description of the manuscript renders it as transient as the passing clouds in the sky described in the opening scene of the novel. As the words on each page are erased by the water the pages themselves are carried away by the river's current,

indicating as much an act of release as a form of loss. Once Bell has performed this river burial, she returns to her home to resume painting in her garden, and it is at this point that Sellers writes the final words of the novel: 'You are right. What matters is that we do not stop creating' (p. 181). Here she echoes Woolf's words from 'A Room of One's Own' when she writes: 'So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say'.³⁷ As the words of Sellers's novel disappear and are swept downstream, the reader is left to anticipate the next biographical portrait of Woolf to be created.

The multiple stages of translation between the textual and the visual are set out by Sellers in her description of the collaborative work undertaken by Woolf and Bell on an unnamed short story. This example serves as a model for the dynamic between Woolf, Bell, Sellers and the reader in the production and interpretation of the novel. The translation of text into image is presented by Sellers when she describes the process involved in the collaboration between the two sisters on an illustrated story. In one passage she makes a possible reference to what was used as the frontispiece for the short story 'Kew Gardens' (1919), which was published with illustrations by Bell surrounding each printed page. In this scene from *Vanessa and Virginia*, Bell recreates these images according to her own reading of Woolf's story, in preparation for what may have become a woodcut printed in the illustrated publication. We see Bell simultaneously reading Woolf's story and creating the pictures that are inspired by her experience:

This time, as I read, I visualise the garden you describe so evocatively. Now, as my eyes travel the lines of your prose, my mind races with ideas. I find paper and charcoal. I work flowers, stems, leaves, round your words. I sketch the two women talking in the garden, their hats tilted at an angle as they exchange confidences. I draw quickly, excitedly. Soon I

³⁷ Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own', pp. 91-92.

have covered your story with my pictures. On some pages I design a simple border, on others I concoct more elaborate illustrations, images from the garden, decorative patterns. (pp. 115-16)

Sellers reveals multiple layers of interpretation as she describes the work that Bell produces in her collaborative efforts with Woolf's writing. The process that Sellers describes here, created by Bell's reading of Woolf's text, presents both a repetition and a mirroring of what we as readers do as we read *Vanessa and Virginia*. As Sellers translates Bell's images back into the words that we read in the novel, the reader may re-imagine the vivid descriptions offered by Sellers as pictures once again. By reading the subject through her sister's textual observations, Bell creates a second interpretation of the scene: 'as I read, I visualise the garden', she also observes. In the original story 'Kew Gardens', Woolf creates different layers of movement that occur within a space, zooming with microscopic detail into a flowerbed where a snail is shown slowly navigating the soil, then panning back out again to present the men and women filing past the flowerbed, and then on to the motor vehicles that speed past Kew Gardens. Sellers draws upon language that suggests both speed and movement when she writes: 'as my eyes travel' and 'my mind races with ideas', in order to 'draw quickly, excitedly.' Circular motions echo the layers created in Woolf's short story: 'I work flowers, stems, leaves round [Woolf's] words', suggesting both the continued act of creativity, as well as a border suggesting an act of sisterly protection. As Figure 3 (below) shows, Bell's illustrations literally weave themselves around Woolf's words, in places almost overlapping the original text. When Sellers writes: 'soon I cover your story with my pictures' it is not clear if this cover remains a form of protection or if it denotes an act of domination in the way that Bell's art overlays Woolf's writing; it is this ambiguity which remains, and which adds to the presence of multiple artists at work in Sellers's novel. The subjects at the centre of the picture

described are not the plants but 'the two women talking in the garden.' While the identities of these two women are not stated, they suggest the 'two elderly women of the lower middle class, one stout and ponderous, the other rosy-cheeked and nimble' as described in Woolf's story.³⁸ In *Vanessa and Virginia*, they are presented simply as two women, their implied identities being those of Bell and Woolf captured in a verbal exchange; it is also an exchange between the two sisters and their arts that Sellers captures here in both the artistic process as well as the subject matter: the two sisters exist at once inside and outside of this image that she creates and writes herself into.

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Kew Gardens' in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction* ([1919] London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 84-89 (p. 87).

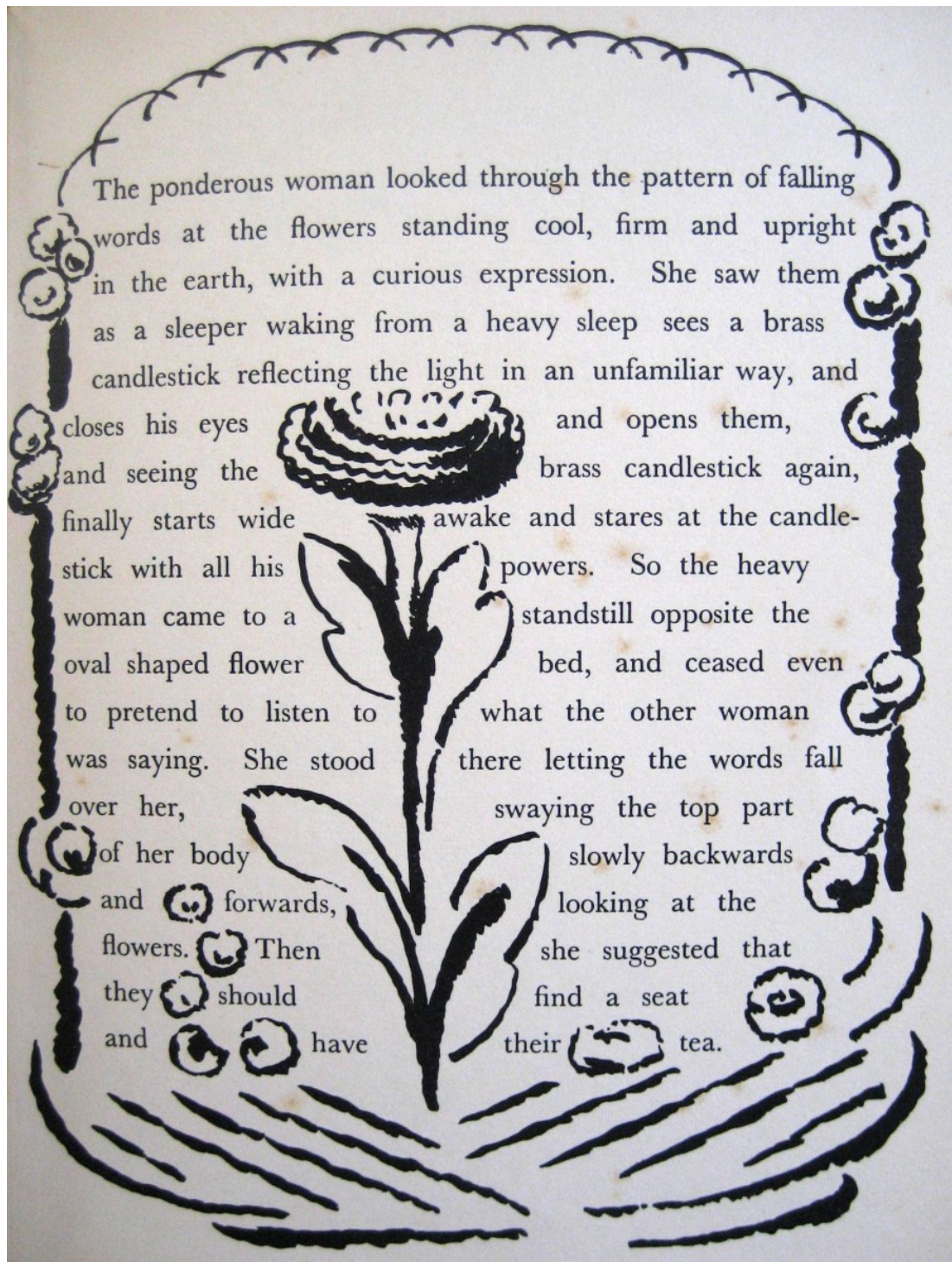


Figure 3: a page from 'Kew Gardens' illustrated by Vanessa Bell (1927).

The characteristic back and forth motion between Woolf's text, Bell's image and Sellers's textual interpretation is also apparent in the portraits of Woolf by Bell that are rendered in *Vanessa and Virginia*. Of the sixteen paintings by Bell that are described in *Vanessa and Virginia*, a combination of portrait, landscape and still life, it is the two portraits of Bell and Woolf described in this novel that are of particular interest. The first of these examples is Bell's portrait of Woolf, the description of which is evocative of Bell's painting *Virginia Woolf In a Deckchair* (1912) but is not specifically identified as such. Figure 4 (below) shows how closely Sellers's description of both the painting and its evolution resembles Bell's completed portrait of Woolf. Sellers presents the painting's aesthetic qualities through the process of its composition, in a scene that immediately follows a discussion between Woolf and Bell that considers the significance of the observer in the production of their respective arts. The scene is conveyed through a series of short, swift sentences that reflect the rapid brushstrokes of the painter that Woolf and Cixous both wished to capture in writing:

I ask you to sit for me [...] I set my easel in the garden, sensing that my task will be easier if I suggest you simply daydream in a chair. I know how you hate being looked at. I block out the frame of your chair, the contours of your body. I work the warm sienna of your dress, the flame of your scarlet tie. As I paint, my feeling of isolation starts to recede. All the hurts and disappointments I have had to bear gradually diminish, until what I am left with is the thing before me and the rhythmic movement of my hand. I think of Mother in her deck-chair in the garden at St Ives [...] My brush restores the caress of hands, the longed-for shelter of loving arms [...] I form the arch of your nose, the bow of your mouth. When the features of your face are done I stop and examine the effect. I have failed. I pick up my knife and scrape the paint clear. I gaze at your closed eyelids, the back of your head resting against the chair. I wash the entire oval of your face in a flesh tone. I look again. This time your expression is a blank. I set my brush aside. I have painted what you are to me. (p. 108)

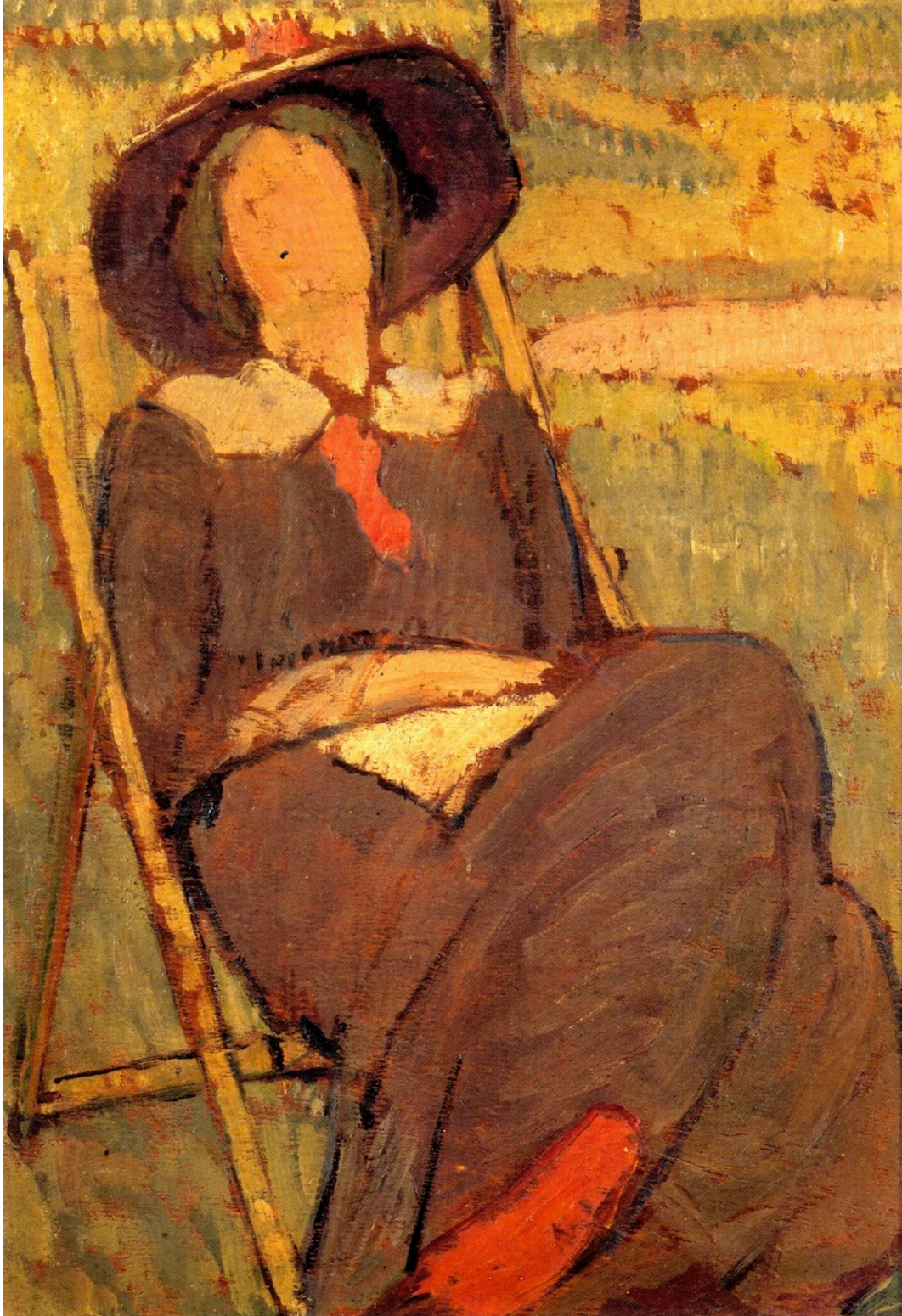


Figure 4: *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair*, Vanessa Bell (1912).

The subject is immediately identified through the second- and first-person pronouns ('I ask you to sit for me') that Sellers adopts throughout the rest of the novel. As such, it remains one of the few portraits featured in *Vanessa and Virginia*, in which the subject is more clearly identified. Sellers draws attention to Woolf's discomfort at becoming the subject of her sister's gaze: 'I know how you hate being looked at', and the detail of Woolf's 'closed eyelids' suggests a resistance to becoming the focus of scrutiny as well as a refusal to reciprocate by looking back at the artist. Bell lists the facial features that she paints: 'I form the arch of your nose, the bow of your mouth', but the eyes that she sees are not those in front of her but are the product of Bell's memory of their mother: 'I think of Mother in her deck-chair in the garden at St Ives, her eyes closed'. At the beginning of this scene, Bell reassures herself: 'my task will be easier if I suggest you simply daydream in a chair', but it is in fact Bell who sits dreaming of their mother, itself a memory of herself daydreaming in a deck-chair. The image that she presents of Bell's portrait destabilises the identity of the subject in the painting. In the novel it becomes tripled, with each woman daydreaming in a chair, an image of deferral. Whatever the identity of the figure in the deckchair, it provides company for Bell, as she exclaims: 'As I paint, my feeling of isolation starts to recede [...] what I am left with is the thing before me and the rhythmic movement of my hand.' This movement of the hand suggests both the process of painting as well as that of writing, the latter of which implies Woolf's returning presence in the scene.

The lack of open eyes accentuates the one-sided gaze; there is no mirror-image created by the two sisters in this scene. In a potentially reciprocal gesture of evasion, Sellers describes Bell's painting in ambiguous terms: 'I block out the frame of your chair, the contours of your body'; the process of 'block[ing] out'

simultaneously suggests both the marks to indicate Woolf's corporeal presence as well as an attempt to erase or exclude the figure before her. The vision of their mother that appears in Bell's imagination further indicates the extent to which she attempts to dislodge Woolf as the focus of her portrait. The movement back and forth between Woolf (as the focus of her gaze) and their mother Julia Stephen (as the object of her memory) continues, as Bell returns to Woolf as the object of her attention: 'I fill out the brim of your hat, the band of your hair framing your face', but she then erases the facial features that previously identified her subject as Woolf, just as the words of her story are wiped away by the water in the river: 'I have failed. I pick up my knife and scrape the paint clear [...] I wash the entire oval of your face in a flesh tone.' The absence of facial features means that the subject is rendered anonymous. The portrait suggests possible incompleteness, but it also implies that the subject could be either her sister or mother.

In the second of these scenes of painting, Sellers depicts Bell beginning to produce a lesser-known work, titled simply as *Self-portrait* (1952).³⁹ Although Sellers does not indicate the date of composition in her novel, a period of forty years separates this painting from that previously described. Now framing Bell's own image as the focus of her gaze, she begins to paint:

Once I have the frame in place, I paint the reverse side of my canvas. I do nothing to disguise its blankness nor embellish its ugliness; what is important is that it covers the central space. To the right of the easel I paint myself, seated on my old chair, the one with the faded green cushion. Around me is the paraphernalia of painting; brushes and rags, my palette and mixing dishes, bottles of oil and turps. I tilt my head away from the easel, leaving the features of the face indistinct. I do not want the focus to be the artist but the act of painting itself [...] After I have been working for some time I pause to assess what I have done. There is the frame of the easel, the daunting emptiness of the canvas, the relative

³⁹ Having asked Susan Sellers about the inspiration for this scene of painting, she directed me (by email) to *Self-portrait* (1952) (Figure 5 below).

frailty of the eye and brush and hand [...] Her posture has an energy and resolution that remind me of you. I examine her figure more closely. This time, I realise that what she holds in her hand is not a brush, but a pen.
(p. 179)



Figure 5: Vanessa Bell, *Self-portrait* (1952).

Bell's initial response is to work on the 'reverse side' of her canvas, as though she wishes to capture something or someone on the other side of the mirror or window. Then she creates a division within the frame, an action that again emphasises a duality implicit in the work. She explains that: 'to the right of my easel I paint myself', along with the tools and materials that identify her as the painter in the picture; however the left-hand side remains blank, full of 'the daunting emptiness of the canvas', obscuring its reverse side. Sellers creates Bell's mirror image; though the sitter can see the image being painted on the canvas, the easel and canvas are turned away from the painting's audience, leaving its subject concealed. If we refer to Figure 5 above, it is possible to see how Bell does not explicitly show that what she paints is a mirror-image of her own reflection. No frames or borders within the canvas suggest the edges of a looking-glass, an absence which further obscures the subject depicted in the painting.

Echoing the example of the portrait of Virginia Woolf previously described, Sellers emphasises the absence of facial features in Bell's self-portrait. They remain 'indistinct'; perpetuating a sense of uncertainty about the subject that is depicted in the painting. In *Self-portrait*, Bell's resemblance to Woolf is clear, and the absence of facial features deepens this ambiguity. As though anticipated by the divisions marked on the canvas, Sellers's Bell refers to the subject in her picture as 'her posture' rather than *my* or *your* posture, as though what she sees is another figure. However, the qualities possessed by the anonymous figure in the painting, with a pen in her hand, suggests an image of Woolf.

As Bell reviews the result of her self-portrait, she highlights its primary concern. In the words of Bell, Sellers remarks: 'I do not want the focus to be the artist but the act of painting itself'. As she focuses on the picture, Woolf emerges in the

frame, as we see that the 'act of painting' in fact becomes an act of writing: 'I examine her figure more closely. This time, I realise that what she holds in her hand is not a brush, but a pen', yet here the artist is integral to the act of painting, as much as they are at the heart of writing. The description remains ambiguous; the figure with the pen could be Woolf, or it could be Bell swapping her brush for a writing tool as she writes her memoir. It could also be Sellers, whose writing as channeled through such visual images is also alluded to in this scene. By drawing attention to the process rather than its product Sellers reveals the recurrent motif of the multiplied subject through the efforts of each of the three women; Woolf, Bell and Sellers. As the writing both by and about Woolf repeatedly reveals, to write about the artist figure does not remain concentrated on a single subject, but inevitably involves a widening focus to include a multiplication of artist figures. It also combines autobiography and biography: Sellers's portrait of Bell's portrait marks a return to Woolf's blending of the two, and the multiple layers of interpretation also suggest the multiple layers of human agency. This enforcement of the author (as both a 'painter' and biographer) within the text offers a fictional characterisation of its various textual manifestations in *Vanessa and Virginia*, and, as a result, a post-Barthesian reassertion of the author-figure.

4.4 Visual Representations of Woolf in *The Hours*

In *The Hours*, I will consider how Cunningham's construction of Woolf is undertaken through a specific focus upon the experiences and processes of reading versus writing. An emphasis upon the textual over the visual is immediately asserted

through its reference to Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. The intimate connections established between Virginia Woolf's biographical life and the events of her novel *Mrs Dalloway* are explicitly outlined from the beginning of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*; the title itself was Woolf's working title for *Mrs Dalloway*. The theatre and film critic Mel Gussow highlights how *The Hours* began as a different book. Initially it was a more literal appropriation of *Mrs Dalloway* with a 52-year-old gay man as its protagonist: 'a kind of Mr. Dalloway',⁴⁰ but how after revisiting the manuscript: 'in the end it became a triptych, about Clarissa Vaughan [...] Laura Brown [...] and Woolf herself'.⁴¹ The unexpected evolution of Cunningham's novel shares striking parallels with that of Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* in the sense that Woolf was not their focus of attention. By looking at someone or something else, however, Woolf eventually became the indirect object of their interest, and this idea of the deferral of attention feeds into the rest of these respective novels. *The Hours* is framed by a prologue and an epilogue, and in the first chapter of the body of *The Hours*, the reader is introduced to Clarissa Vaughan in Manhattan at the end of the 1990s. She prepares to leave her house to buy flowers for a party she is due to host later that day, just as Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway leaves her home to run the same errand in London in the 1920s. The novel is divided into three narrative strands, with each one representing the three women whose stories are told by Cunningham. The opening line of the 'Mrs. Dalloway' section mirrors the opening of Woolf's novel, as he states that: 'There are still the flowers to buy'.⁴² In the second narrative thread of *The Hours* (entitled 'Mrs. Woolf'), the reader is introduced to Woolf waking one morning in the

⁴⁰ Mel Gussow, 'A Writer Haunted by Virginia Woolf', *New York Times*, (20 April 1999) <<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/20/books/a-writer-haunted-by-virginia-wolof.html>> [accessed 11 October 2011] (para. 12 of 19).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, para. 13 of 19.

⁴² Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* ([1998] London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. 9. Further references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

bedroom of her Richmond home in June 1923. We see the author hesitate as she begins composing the first words of *Mrs Dalloway*: 'Mrs. Dalloway said something (what?), and got the flowers herself' (p. 29). In the final of the three narrative threads (entitled 'Mrs. Brown') we see the housewife Laura Brown living in Los Angeles in the late 1940s, reading the first words of *Mrs Dalloway* early one morning, a tactic she uses to delay rising from her bed. Cunningham's Laura Brown is an allusion to and assertion of 'Mrs. Brown', the embodiment of human character that Woolf creates in her essay 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924).⁴³

The first words of *The Hours* that we read are also the first words of Woolf's novel, and the first words that Laura reads: 'Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself' (p. 37).⁴⁴ It is not the voice of Cunningham that we hear at the start of the 'Mrs Brown' chapters, but rather those of Woolf. In his review of *The Hours*, the journalist Nicholas Wroe describes Cunningham's use of *Mrs Dalloway* in the writing of his novel as 'more like the way a jazz musician might do a riff on an older, more established piece of music, but it takes that music and turns it into something else'.⁴⁵ Wroe's description of the novel resembles Silver's analysis of versioning, where the process that Woolf's image undergoes is now being applied to the text. If the versioning that Silver identifies regarding Woolf's image were to reunite the life and the writing, *The Hours* now makes that possible. The reader also becomes doubled here, as we, alongside Laura Brown, simultaneously read the same text. What Woolf does with the writer writing, Cunningham here achieves through the process of reading. In *The Hours*, a doubling of both the writer and the reader occurs;

⁴³ Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (referred to in this edition as 'Character in Fiction') in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume 3: 1919-1924*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie ([1924] London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), pp. 420-38.

⁴⁴ Also quoted in Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Wroe, 'Driving Mrs Dalloway', *Guardian*, 13 November 1999 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/nov/13/fiction>> [accessed 11 January 2011] (para. 7 of 12).

one fictional, one real. Alongside the figure of Woolf lies the implied presence of Michael Cunningham, while the fictional reader Laura Brown is accompanied by the real-life reader of *The Hours*. While *Mrs Dalloway* is the text that unites each of the three seemingly disparate 'Mrs. Woolf', 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'Mrs. Brown' narrative strands that constitute *The Hours*, it is the chapters in which we see Laura Brown and Virginia Woolf engaged in their respective tasks of reading and writing that are of greatest interest in my analysis of Cunningham's novel. He imagines the circumstances that lead Woolf to begin composing the opening lines of *Mrs Dalloway*. In addition, he depicts Laura Brown in the process of reading *Mrs Dalloway* through an awareness of Woolf's personal life, just as she herself blurs the distinctions between the writing and the author's biographical life: Laura is engaged in a simultaneous process of reading Woolf when she is in fact engaged in reading Woolf's fiction. I wish to consider how the two complimentary activities of reading Woolf (undertaken by Laura) and writing (performed by Cunningham's Woolf) impact upon their respective constructions of Woolf as a subject. Using Maria DiBattista's reading strategy as a starting point, I will look specifically at the relationship between the process of *reading* against the process of *writing* Woolf and how this develops to incorporate a more explicit exchange between the present-day reader and Cunningham, the novel's author.

The first image of Laura Brown that is presented to the reader shows her beginning to read the opening lines of *Mrs Dalloway*. Cunningham quotes the first two paragraphs of Woolf's novel, differentiated from his own narrative through the use of italics, so that we as readers experience a moment of *déjà vu*: when Laura begins to read the opening lines of *Mrs Dalloway*, the reader also reads the beginning of Woolf's novel over again. He explains: 'Laura Brown is trying to lose herself. No,

that's not it exactly — she is trying to keep herself by gaining entry into a parallel world' (p. 37): this 'parallel world' is that of Clarissa Dalloway's London in the 1920s, but as readers of *The Hours*, we also enter our own parallel textual world: that of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Towards the end of *The Hours*, in the final 'Mrs. Brown' section, we see her getting ready to go to bed at the end of the day, reflecting upon what she has just read:

Yes, she thinks, this is probably how it must feel to be a ghost. It's a little like reading, isn't it — that same sensation of knowing people, settings, situations, without playing any particular part beyond that of the willing observer. (p. 215)

This process of reading, of 'knowing people, settings, situations', is undertaken by Laura in response to *Mrs Dalloway*, yet the reader of *The Hours* is presented with multiple layers of reading. We observe Laura Brown, Virginia Woolf and Clarissa Vaughan, all of whom are situated within the context of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. The reader may already be familiar with the characters and the plot of Woolf's novel before we read Cunningham's reinterpretation. Cunningham hints at his appropriation of Woolf's novel when he compares Laura Brown's reading of *Mrs Dalloway* to a ghostly experience. It is a comparison that also affects us as readers of *The Hours*, with Woolf's original novel existing as a ghostly text that haunts Cunningham's version. It is through this idea of the ghostly that we return once more to the recurrent motif of death, which runs through the multiple layers of *The Hours*. In an interview with the critic David Bahr, Michael Cunningham reveals his wish to 'be writing in [his] own voice steeped in Woolf's'.⁴⁶ From the author's declaration, it is evident that this novel is written through the two distinct writerly voices of

⁴⁶ Bahr, David, 'The Difference a Day Makes: After *Hours* with Michael Cunningham', *Poets and Writers Magazine*, July/August 1999, pp. 18-23 (p. 21).

Cunningham and Woolf, and as though the 'experience of the mass' that Woolf writes of in 'A Room of One's Own' becomes manifest not only as a result of two different texts, but also through a depiction of her own life.⁴⁷

For the reader of Cunningham's novel, the possibilities of these parallel worlds become twofold. The removal to the outside of the text (as its reader) adds a further layer of reading, opening up the realm of Laura Brown's Los Angeles at the end of the 1940s as well as that of Clarissa Dalloway's 1920s London. Where Woolf campaigned for a room of one's own in which women could write, Cunningham's Laura Brown desires a room of her own in which to perform the role of the reader. It is this room that she yearns and finally acquires when she leaves her son with a neighbour and drives to a hotel where she rents a room in which to quietly continue reading Woolf's novel, before returning home to her son to host the birthday party for her husband, Dan. The world of Laura's Los Angeles in the 1940s is already a reflection of the one imagined by Woolf, which she creates for Clarissa Dalloway's 1920s London: Cunningham draws out a number of motifs from *Mrs Dalloway* that become repeated throughout each of the three narrative strands. He presents one day in the lives of each of the three women Clarissa Vaughan, Laura Brown and Virginia Woolf as they prepare to host their parties, just as Woolf shows one day in the lives of Clarissa Dalloway, the poet Septimus Warren Smith and the doctor Sir William Bradshaw in her novel. However, when Laura Brown is reading *Mrs Dalloway* it is not against Clarissa Dalloway that she compares herself, but against Woolf. As she reads the passage in which Clarissa leaves her Westminster home on an errand to buy flowers, Laura's focus shifts from the character of the novel to the life of its author, thereby taking her from 1920s London to East Sussex in the early 1940s, as she

⁴⁷ Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own', p. 56.

reflects upon the influence of the biographical life upon the writing: 'How, Laura wonders, could someone who was able to write a sentence like that — who was able to feel everything contained in a sentence like that — come to kill herself?' (p. 41). It is not the words on the page that prompt this question but an awareness of the author's biographical life that brings Laura back to this impression of Woolf, read through the context of her death. It is an association through which Cunningham questions whether a reader really can 'know' an author beyond the words presented on a page. Where Woolf urged her reader to look for traces of the author in the writing (her strategy in 'Sterne'), Cunningham encourages a reading of the author subject that is more reliant on details of the biographical life. In *The Hours* it is not Woolf's biographical *life* as such but more specifically her *death* that serves as the impetus for reading her work, and it is the image that Cunningham presents in his prologue of Woolf walking into the River Ouse, that keeps returning to Laura as she reads *Mrs Dalloway*:

Right now she is reading Virginia Woolf, all of Virginia Woolf, book by book — she is fascinated by the idea of a woman like that, a woman of such brilliance, such strangeness, such immeasurable sorrow; a woman who had genius but still filled her pocket with a stone and waded out into a river. (p. 42)

The sense of repetition that carries through the novel appears once again, as Laura returns to the same image later in the novel. As she lies on her hotel bed continuing to read *Mrs Dalloway*: 'She imagines Virginia Woolf, virginal, unbalanced, defeated by the impossible demands of life and art; she imagines her stepping into a river with a stone in her pocket' (p. 152). By returning to this image of Woolf's death, Cunningham draws his reader back to the beginning of the novel in which he presents his own interpretation of Woolf drowning herself in the river near her home

on 28 March 1941. Conversely, the conclusion of Woolf's life provides Cunningham with the beginning of his novel. Michael Whitworth indicates the connection that Cunningham makes between a day in 1923 and the day of Woolf's death in 1941, and the effect that this connection has upon the narrative: 'by beginning the novel with Woolf's death, Cunningham makes her a suicide first, and a writer second'.⁴⁸ I would argue that, by opening the novel with Woolf's suicide, Cunningham presents his reader with something more complex than simply a reductive reading of his subject's life through the context of her death. It suggests less of a fascination with her personal life, and by presenting this death as the opening scene of the novel he refers to the many ways that Woolf has been viewed in the years since this moment. The prologue of *The Hours* offers a comment on the status of Woolf as a biographical subject, rendered through the many debates that have spanned the past half-century, regarding her biographical representation. Hermione Lee argues that the narrative structure of *The Hours* has a reductive effect upon Woolf's character, and its subsequent interpretation. While the following comment relates specifically to Stephen Daldry's film version, it is a trait shared with Cunningham's novel:

Since the film begins with this romanticised version of the suicide of Virginia Woolf, it sets up a life-story which is moving inexorably towards that death. In the next moment that we see her, she is starting to write *Mrs Dalloway*, so that to a casual audience the two things — her writing of the novel and her suicide — might be going on at the same time.⁴⁹

I would like to suggest, however, that the positioning of Woolf's suicide at the beginning of the novel is indicative not simply of her death, but of her biographical afterlife: the representations that exist and her many manifestations as a biographical

⁴⁸ Whitworth, p. 219.

⁴⁹ Hermione Lee, 'Virginia Woolf's Nose' in *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography* ([2005] Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007) pp. 37-62 (p. 40).

subject. *The Hours*, overall, supports her transformation from historical literary figure to the multiple and changing biographical subject that we identify now. Brenda Silver makes a startling claim about Woolf's representation in *The Hours*, which appears to disregard her own insistence of the proliferation of 'Woolfs' that she herself identifies in *Virginia Woolf Icon*. In her review of Cunningham's novel, the critic Patricia Cohen remarks how 'Professor Silver couldn't finish *The Hours* when she first picked it up because she was so annoyed by the "faux Virginia Woolf" writing and voice'.⁵⁰ When translated into the context of biography, such a statement of possession works against the values she claims to assert in *Virginia Woolf Icon* regarding the ongoing and democratic practice of versioning, in which no individual may claim to be the owner of the 'real' Woolf. Cunningham's portrait of Woolf firmly establishes this idea of her as a multiple, fluid and ever-changing biographical subject.

This suicide scene has a profound effect upon the representation of Woolf throughout the rest of Cunningham's novel. By repeatedly returning to the moment of Woolf's suicide the reader habitually revisits the prologue of *The Hours*. It is in this opening section that Cunningham recreates the scene of her suicide in the River Ouse in East Sussex in March 1941. Therefore, the novel literally begins with the death of the author. There can exist no empirical account of this moment in Woolf's life, so its recreation will only ever remain a point of speculation; and by doing so, Cunningham directly addresses the problem of writing biography. As Lee has stated, the writing of Woolf's life will only ever be a rewriting of a version that has already been written.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Patricia Cohen, 'The Nose Was the Final Straw', *New York Times* (15 February 2003) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/15/movies/the-nose-was-the-final-straw.html>> [accessed 08 January 2011] (para. 16 of 25).

⁵¹ Lee, 'Biomythographers', p. 95.

The Hours begins with a departure, but this time it is not Clarissa Dalloway leaving her home on an errand to buy flowers for her party. The first words of the novel read: 'She hurries from the house' (p. 3), referring to Woolf's final departure from her home in Rodmell, East Sussex, as well as her imminent disappearance from the physical world. We witness her desire for obscurity before she has even reached the river, as she observes a fisherman standing on its banks. Woolf first asks herself: 'he won't notice her, will he?' (p. 4) and again during her short walk Cunningham states that the same fisherman 'does not see her' (p. 5). It is only the reader for whom Woolf remains visible in this scene.

As Woolf continues walking away from Monk's House, we also witness a gradual extinction of her identity. Cunningham's Woolf is progressively overpowered by the voices that he repeatedly refers to:

She herself has failed. She is not a writer at all, really; she is merely a gifted eccentric [...] She herself has failed, and now the voices are back, muttering indistinctly just beyond the range of her vision, behind her, here, no, turn and they've gone somewhere else. (p. 4)

If we read this within a biographical context, the voices referred to are clearly symptomatic of Woolf's mental illness: this detail cannot be disputed, as the actual suicide note (quoted in full by Cunningham later in the prologue) demonstrates. However, I would like to suggest an alternative reading of this scene that reflects upon Woolf's posthumous life as a biographical subject. To a reader in the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries, *The Hours* hints at the proliferation of Virginia Woolfs observed by Hermione Lee and Brenda Silver. The many 'voices' that Woolf hears anticipate the numerous critics and biographers who have repeatedly and variously constructed their respective images of Woolf over the past half a century. In *The Hours* alone, it is possible to identify the voices of Laura Brown,

Michael Cunningham and even that of the reader, all fashioning their own impressions of the author, in the same way that Sylvia Plath has become the product of numerous voices all vying to construct her posthumous identity. The voices that occupy her mind also evade her field of perception and remain always ahead of her reach. They are: 'beyond the range of her vision, behind her [...] turn and they've gone' (p. 4), as though Woolf knows that they are on the verge of usurping her place in the physical world, as her own sense of identity dissipates. Woolf's erasure from the physical world in *The Hours* chimes with the erasure of Vanessa Bell's manuscript in *Vanessa and Virginia*. The location of both examples is the river, thereby re-enacting Woolf's actual suicide, but the imagery adopted in the respective novels (one physical, the other textual) illustrates the extent to which the biographical life and the literary legacy are combined in the formation of this author's posthumous image.

Woolf's representation in the film adaptation of *The Hours* has sparked a continued lively debate surrounding what is deemed to be accurate or inaccurate as a real-life subject. Arguments on the topic have deepened following the release of Stephen Daldry's film in 2002, creating a divide between perceptions of the 'realistic' and 'unrealistic' in Woolf's on-screen portrayal: Daldry's decision to cast Nicole Kidman as Woolf lies at the centre of this debate. Hermione Lee's essay, 'Virginia Woolf's Nose' (2005) provides an insightful overview of the debates generated by Kidman's Woolf — and indeed to the many claims that have been made to the many different 'Woolfs' by biographers, literary critics, and film viewers alike. The 'Nose' referred to in Lee's essay is a direct reference to the nasal prosthesis that Kidman wears for her performance as Woolf, and which stands for a greater and more general consideration of the question of authenticity and inauthenticity that surrounds

Woolf's (as well as other writers') many fictional portrayals. Michael Whitworth also offers a comprehensive review of the many film adaptations of Woolf's novels since the 1980s in 'Recontextualising and Reconstructing Woolf', but Woolf's appearance in the film of *The Hours* asserts a celebrity status that takes her beyond — yet keeps her within — the context of her life as a writer.

It is at the point that her biological life is extinguished that Woolf undergoes a dramatic transformation in this novel. She is no longer described in negative terms as a 'failure' or 'not a writer' on the verge of extinction but experiences a moment of liberation when she enters the water: 'She appears to be flying, a fantastic figure, arms outstretched, hair streaming, the tail of the fur coat billowing behind' (p. 7). Cunningham's representation of her death signals the point at which she takes on a new existence before she then 'passes out of sight' (p. 7) and her body suddenly comes to rest at the bottom of the river: 'she is firmly positioned at the base of the squat, square column, with her back to the river and her face against the stone' (p. 8). No longer a vulnerable figure, her body rests 'firmly' at the base of a bridge, where it prepares to absorb the exterior world: 'All this enters the bridge, resounds through its wood and stone, and enters Virginia's body. Her face, pressed sideways to the piling, absorbs it all: the truck and the soldiers, the mother and the child' (p. 8). The mother and child represent the future generations, and each of the voices that re-imagine and reinterpret Woolf's life in her name. Woolf's death, as it is presented in this prologue, denotes both the future of her life in biography as well as adhering to the details of her biographical life. This reference to the future returns the reader more specifically to Cunningham writing this novel, as well as to the details of her life, and to the future events relating to Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughan. As such, *The Hours* functions according to a cyclical movement, where the reader is drawn back to the

past and to the moment of Woolf's death, before being projected forward to the present day by Cunningham's interpretation of his subject's suicide. Whitworth also identifies a cyclical structure in *The Hours*, but argues that this supports a reading of Woolf's biographical life:

the biographical strand of Cunningham's novel works by a circular process: it takes elements from the writer's published works, and inserts them in fictitious scenes from the writer's life; it then encourages the reader to see the works as echoes of the life.⁵²

I oppose Whitworth's reading of *The Hours* as a reductive interpretation of the writing as a reading of the life, by insisting that the cyclical motion relates more specifically to Woolf's creation and expansion as a proliferating biographical subject.

We next see Virginia Woolf waking in her Richmond home on a day in June in 1923. The reader is transported from the final moments of her life as depicted in the prologue, to the beginning of a new day, and to the beginning of her novel *Mrs Dalloway* nearly twenty years earlier. Cunningham imagines how Woolf might have composed the opening lines of her novel, just as Woolf imagines how Laurence Sterne might have composed *Tristram Shandy* in her essay, 'Sterne'. The feeling of uncertainty regarding Woolf's sense of identity in the prologue is now channelled through her experience of authorship. She hesitates as she begins to construct the first sentence: 'Mrs. Dalloway said something (what?) and got the flowers herself' (p. 29). This scene, which opens Woolf's day in 1923, mirrors Cunningham's own situation: he imagines the first moments of Woolf's day, just as Woolf creates those of her character Clarissa Dalloway.

⁵² Whitworth, p. 220.

As Woolf rises from her bed, the reader is presented with an image reminiscent of a childhood scene from her memoir 'Sketch of the Past', in which she hesitates before a mirror. In *The Hours*, she appears before her looking-glass, but avoids looking directly at her reflection:

She does not look into the oval mirror that hangs above the basin. She is aware of her reflected movements in the glass but does not permit herself to look. The mirror is dangerous; it sometimes shows her the dark manifestation of air that matches her body, takes her form, but stands behind, watching her, with porcine eyes and wet, hushed breathing. (pp. 30-31)

Woolf's refusal to look into the mirror implies a refusal to acknowledge a reflection that she recognises as both hers and not hers. She registers 'reflected movements' and a 'dark manifestation of air', which together outline an intermittent shadowy presence, and a refusal to fix her identity in the image reflected before her. This scene also echoes Woolf's statement about Clarissa Dalloway, that 'She would not say of anyone in the world now that they were this or were that',⁵³ thereby acknowledging the plurality of the self. When Vanessa Bell visits Woolf later in *The Hours*, we see her refuse to look in the mirror again, but instead perceives her reflection in the image of another. Cunningham writes: 'she is tempted, briefly, to look at her reflection. But she can't [...] Vanessa will be her mirror, just as she's always been' (p. 114). Cunningham's pertinent observation is of course expanded in much greater detail by Sellers in *Vanessa and Virginia*, the artistic relationship between the two sisters informing the entire composition of her novel. The mirror scenes in *The Hours* convey a sense of Woolf's identity that is less multiple and changing, but rather precarious and interchangeable.

⁵³ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 5.

This motif of doubling returns in Cunningham's descriptions of the experience of writing. In the following passage the moment of literary creativity is depicted as a form of possession, as though Woolf is shadowed by another writing figure. Cunningham writes:

She can feel it inside her, an all but indescribable second self, or rather a parallel, purer self. If she were religious, she would call it the soul [...] writing in that state is the most profound satisfaction she knows, but her access to it comes and goes without warning. She may pick up her pen and follow it with her hand as it moves across the paper; she may pick up her pen and find that she's merely herself, a woman in a housecoat holding a pen, afraid and uncertain, only mildly competent, with no idea about where to begin or what to write. (pp. 34-35)

In his description of the experience of writing, we see brief glimpses of a figure that could be Cunningham's, as the manifestation of a shadowy writing self. His suggested presence here reflects his efforts to write about Woolf's day, itself a mirroring of Woolf's own attempts to write a day in the life of her fictional character Clarissa Dalloway. It is Cunningham who controls this image of Woolf, and it is therefore he who imagines the pen that is followed by Woolf's hand 'as it moves across the paper'. Here Cunningham becomes the force that determines this image of Woolf; as a fictional character, Woolf however is reduced to a puppet, whose strings are operated by the novel's author. This example demonstrates how the novel allows a greater degree of control over the biographical subject than the conventional biographical form otherwise permits.

Further allusions to Cunningham's role as the writer appear throughout the novel, played out in the precariousness of Woolf's identity as an author. Returning home after a short walk around Richmond, Woolf considers her writerly self:

On the steps of Hogarth House, she pauses to remember herself. She has learned over the years that sanity involves a certain measure of impersonation [...] She is the author; Leonard, Nelly, Ralph, and the others are the readers. This particular novel concerns a serene, intelligent woman of painfully susceptible sensibilities who once was ill but has now recovered. (p. 83)

Again, it is Cunningham whose presence can be glimpsed, as the reader witnesses him impersonating Woolf throughout the novel. He places himself in her situation as she begins writing *Mrs Dalloway*, and with increasing self-consciousness creates 'the character who is Virginia Woolf'. The lines between Woolf writing her novel and Cunningham writing *The Hours* become increasingly blurred, as reference is made to 'This particular novel': the work in question is not named, and it could therefore be either or both *The Hours* and *Mrs Dalloway* referred to here. The identity of 'the others', who join Leonard, Nelly and Ralph as the 'readers' also remains unclear in the same way that what (or who) they are reading remains unspecified; contemporary readers of *The Hours* join the historical figures from Woolf's lifetime as possible readers referred to by Cunningham. This scene also connects with Henry James and his identity formation through Lamb House as explored in the previous chapter; here in *The Hours*, Woolf's home is also figured as a stage in the performance of her authorial identity.

As Woolf's day draws to a close, a shift in the visual manifestation of Woolf's subject can be perceived. The motif of the ending as a beginning, first illustrated by the novel's prologue, is repeated as night approaches and the daylight fades: 'Virginia stands at a parlour window watching the dark descend on Richmond' (p. 163). The scene shifts to Woolf's parlour, in which the papers of her novel lie on her writing table, just as the pages of 'Women and Fiction' lie on the writing table in the empty

room of 'A Room of One's Own'. As the light dims and night approaches, we see the projection of Woolf's reflection emerging and 'her own face becoming more strongly reflected in the window glass as the street lamps — pale lemon against an ink-blue sky — light up all over Richmond' (p. 164). The recurrent idea of the multiplicity of the self re-emerges here, with a repetition of the mirror motif. As the previous quotation illustrates, the conception of the looking-glass does more to cast doubt over the identity of the subject than it provides its affirmation. As this scene shows, no direct images or portraits of Woolf are offered in this novel but involve the presence of another; all glimpses of Woolf are projected as deferred reflections or projections through someone, or something, else. The window also provides a two-way frame that allows Woolf to look outside, as well as for viewers to look back inside at her. The mirror scenes described earlier in the novel permit only a single image to be seen, although the images that the mirror projects are equally ambiguous and unstable. The image that is reflected in the windows of Woolf's home reveals both a sharpening of Woolf's visual image and self-perception (Cunningham remarks at this point that: 'She is herself' (p. 164)), and the ability for outsiders to simultaneously gaze at Woolf through the glass. Continuing the image of the house as significant in the formation of the writerly identity, here we can visualise a proliferation of Woolfs projected in and appearing to look out from each window, itself an assertion that her image is both multiple as well as inextricably linked to her home. This idea of Woolf as the object of scrutiny is an assertion of her status as a popular biographical subject, represented both by the 'versioning' identified by Brenda Silver, as well as the various biographical portraits of Woolf that have been produced since her death.

Woolf decides to leave her home for a second time that day, this time to take a train to London. In another attempt to become invisible she admits to her husband

Leonard that 'She had in fact staged an escape of sorts, and had in fact meant to disappear, if only for a few hours' (p. 171). It is during this walk from Hogarth House to Richmond station that her image is once again reflected in the windows that she passes, but this time the effect has altered. Cunningham writes: 'She is passing her fragmented golden reflection in the gold name of the butcher's shop, suspended on glass over a lamb's carcass' (p. 170). Her reflection here is only partially visible and fragmented, as the letters that appear to hover over the surface provide an impression of instability upon which her image is projected. The letters on the glass of the butcher's shop create a more solid, albeit broken foundation for Woolf's reflection. However, this impression of a fragmented Woolf perpetuates the idea embodied by the novel's prologue, where the writer's identity is repeatedly constructed, dispersed, then erased.

It is at this point that Leonard and Virginia Woolf decide to move back to London, a move that promises to nurture her identity as a writer, and it is as a writer that Woolf is able to imagine the future: 'She will write and write. She will finish this book, then write another. She will remain sane and she will live as she was meant to live, richly and deeply, among others of her kind, in full possession and command of her gifts' (p. 209). Cunningham breaks off his narrative of Woolf, himself receding as the author and authority of the novel to instead allow his subject to take control of her own authorial image. He closes his portrait of Woolf with a decision made about the course of the narrative of *Mrs Dalloway*: 'Clarissa, sane Clarissa — exultant, ordinary Clarissa — will go on, loving London, loving her life of ordinary pleasures, and someone else, a deranged poet, a visionary, will be the one to die' (p. 211). By ending with this reference to death, the reader is drawn back once again to the prologue and to the scene of Woolf's suicide, thereby creating a cyclical movement in

the experience of reading and the impression of writing. The ambiguous reference to the 'deranged poet' also draws the reader back to the beginning of Cunningham's novel, whilst at the same time diverts the reader's focus away to *Mrs Dalloway*, with its allusion to Woolf's fictional character Septimus Smith. The final 'Mrs. Woolf' section of the novel closes with this ambiguous reference to the 'deranged poet', which consequently unites Woolf's fictional work with her biographical life. With this reference to death, the narrative is taken full circle to the moment of Woolf's suicide, and the beginning of her posthumous life.

Cunningham's depiction of the fictional reader and writer, and the suggested parallel existence of their real-life counterparts, serve to highlight and embody a return to the symbiotic existence of the author and the literary text asserted by his biographical subject, Virginia Woolf. Where *The Hours* succeeds as an example of the contemporary biographical novel is in its ability to reconfigure Woolf's approach to this writer/text union (whilst at the same time introducing the reader in this exchange) as a reflection of the amorphous and plural biographical subject that Woolf herself has now become.

4.5 Woolfian Afterlives

As Hermione Lee's observations as a biographer make apparent, the question surrounding Virginia Woolf does not relate to her biographical life, but rather concerns ways of negotiating her biographical *afterlife*. Woolf teaches the contemporary novelist a great deal when she writes about the experience of writing,

where she utilises the writer figure to foreground the effect of creativity. However, in the case of the contemporary novelists Michael Cunningham and Susan Sellers, it is this emphasis upon creativity that produces their respective portraits of Woolf and, in turn, the impression of their own presence as authors within the novels. Through a common interest in this idea of creation, both novelists demonstrate how it is not only the product of their focus that becomes multiple but that the method of production is multitudinous too. The *visual* alongside the *textual*; the *readerly* beside the *writerly*, the many ways of both interpreting and producing biographical portraits initially used by Woolf all speak to one another in *The Hours* and *Vanessa and Virginia* to create a dialogue through which Virginia Woolf is reinvented and recreated as a biographical subject. When Hermione Lee asserts that: 'the writing of this life can only ever be a rewriting', she prepares the ground for such treatment of the subject in the biographical novel.⁵⁴ As we have seen, the river scenes in both novels and their respective representations of Woolf's literal death ensure that in her biographical afterlife she does not die, but continues to be repeatedly reinvented and recreated. The biographical novel acknowledges and embraces the proliferation of Woolfs that have already come before; but they also, more importantly, anticipate the future Woolfs that are still to come, through their perpetuation of the creative experience.

⁵⁴ Lee, 'Biomythographers', p. 95.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion: The Biographical Novel: Afterthoughts and Afterlives

To write about an author and the process of writing involves the presence of another alongside the self, and it is through an exploration of the creative process that both the 'self' and 'other' are drawn out. The presence of voices; the image of the house; the exchange between reading and writing: it is through these motifs that the three biographical subjects Plath, James, and Woolf, have cultivated — and been cultivated by — their respective authorial images. In my introductory chapter to this thesis, I proposed to establish what occurs when contemporary novelists engage in a process of both imagining the author-subject, and in conveying the creative experience. What results in each of these cases is a complex manifestation of the author-figure; or, rather, author-figures. The biographical novels that I have studied in this thesis produce both multiple versions of a *single* author-subject, as well as multiple different figures that constitute the 'author' within the body of writing.

Through Plath's figuration as a dialogic entity, through James's image of the house as a refracted mirror/window, and through Woolf's manifestation as a product of reading and writing processes, each biographical novel has engaged with key critical and biographical questions affecting both the writing and reception of their literary subjects. They have also — as I demonstrate in the case of each author-subject — prompted a revision of some key poststructuralist theories that would otherwise reject the idea of the author as a legitimate presence in the reading of a text. The dynamics of dialogism, the uncanny moment of observing and being observed, and the process of reading, writing, and painting, all comprise an exchange; as such they require contributions from more than one subject and

consequently reveal indirectly the presence of another. These exchanges could imply the elusiveness or deferral of authorial identity. They may also demonstrate a greater concern with the multiplicity of authorial identity within a text. Perhaps its focus is directed upon the ambiguous identity of the author. The biographical novel's strength lies in its capacity to articulate each of these qualities, all within a single text. Consequently, the author in this literary form is not so much a figure or an individual, but a group, cluster, or myriad of forms, figures, voices or images.

The process of trying to access and understand the creative mind is very much a human response, made even more personal by an author's identification with and engagement in this literary act. Yet, the product of the biographical novel remains as much the reader's: it captures the writer and the reader in their mutual production of the author-figure and the textual portraits that result from the respective readings. Whether reflecting the self or the subject, these textual portraits (or 'self/portraits') also remain deeply personal connections to both the writer and the writing. Life-writing has now progressed beyond both a belief in, or a preoccupation with, biography or autobiography as a documentary form, and each of the biographical novelists addressed in this thesis assert that literary biography is now grounded in the expression and exploration of the literary life. As we witness in each of the preceding chapters, poststructuralist theory is adopted and revised in my reading of the three author-subjects and the six core texts that I discuss in this thesis. In Chapter 2, contemporary formations of Sylvia Plath are viewed through Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, itself a revision of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism. Chapter 3 presents Henry James as he is figured in the contemporary biographical novel through the filter of Helene Cixous's poststructuralist theory of the uncanny, also a reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud's earlier definition of the same phenomenon

in his essay 'The Uncanny'. The fourth and final chapter on Virginia Woolf sees Cixous's theory of writing as painting as a return to Woolf's own approach to life-writing. In each of these three cases, we witness a revision of ideas initially formulated by their precursors at the start of the twentieth century. Such revisionist strategies mirror the undertakings of the modernist biographers Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, whose own approaches to life-writing are a response to the ideas endorsed by their Victorian predecessors. Today, at the start of the twenty-first century, these two revisionary methods of refiguring the author combine, effectively reinstating the author both behind and within the literary text; a textual effect that restores a humanist belief that poststructuralist theorists had been so keen to reject.

Life-writing that involves literary subjects is an evolving form that must reflect the flexibility of both the writing and the subject. This is a form that allows for the expression of a continued interest in and interrogation of the relationship between the written word and its creator; one that does not claim to hold or support any objective or definitive account of the creator's life or their literary experience. What makes the biographical novel a legitimate account of the writing life is not merely its status as biography reduced to fiction; instead it presents an authentic expression of this artistic experience.

This blurring of the generic boundaries between fiction, biography and autobiography can be attributed to the modernist approaches to life-writing (as outlined in my introductory chapter); a practice that overthrows the poststructuralist distinction between a writer and his or her work, by emphasising the simultaneous function of the author as reader. The contemporary biographical novel about an author indicates the emergence of a post-poststructuralist school of biographical fiction that ingeniously reinstates the author as a fundamental factor in the reading of

a text. At a time when the historical author continues to be an object of fascination; the subject of literary biographies, depicted in film television and in theatre, and as part of the continuing cult of celebrity, it seems inevitable that such prominence should also be channelled through the literary medium.

The biographical novel provides the most appropriate form for exploring the experience of the literary life, offering freedom through the use of fictional license that allows the novelist to explore the lives of their subjects in ways that also pave the way for more flexibility in the exploration and conception of exactly who or what their subject or subjects might be. The movement back and forth between self and other generates an ongoing and evolving product of the experience of writing about the writer, a perpetual motion symbolic of the wider practice as an ongoing process; that creativity is indeed ongoing, and that capturing the creative life will equally remain unfinished.

As Virginia Woolf implored in 'The New Biography', we must continue to look to the past, consider the present, and contemplate the future in the practice and understanding of life-writing: the biographical novel provides a crucial advance in this progressive form. The thoughts and words of author-subjects continue to be analysed and pored over by biographers, critics and readers. It was the sudden appearance of numerous biographical novels in 2004 (a prolific year for fictional accounts of the lives of real-life authors) that first sparked my interest in the project that eventually developed into this thesis, and numerous further examples have continued to be published throughout the period of my research. The publication of Maggie Gee's *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* in the summer of 2014 and Priya Parmar's *Vanessa and Her Sister* in the spring of 2015 are testament to the fact that this moment in life-writing is not yet over. The novels and author-subjects that I address

in this thesis are not intended to indicate an exhaustive body of works; I propose that the reading strategy I adopt may also be used as a starting point for a reading of other author-subjects and other biographical novels.

Through this thesis, I wish to assert that the biographical novel illustrates what developments in life-writing have achieved so far, but this by no means signifies an endpoint or exhaustion of the form. The flexibility of the fictional form provides a starting point for potentially inexhaustible forms for expressing the writing subject, and the experience of writing. At this point I reiterate Virginia Woolf's sentiment in 'The New Biography' when she suggests that life-writing might not yet have achieved all that it is capable of, and that it maintains the potential to continue evolving and changing just like the lives that remain its focus.

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