

Writing the Bedlam Trilogy

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Abstract:

This essay is a reflective exploration of the inception and development of three novels I wrote set in Victorian (and Regency) London, so as to try and understand why this period still has such a powerful grip on our collective imaginations. I question whether our understanding of the nineteenth century is stereotypical or superficial, and to what extent we can escape from our own intellectual preoccupations and biases into those of our forebears. By reflecting on my own writing process, I ask whether, if we do manage to thus 'escape', this amounts to 'escapism' – a fear of confronting our own uncertain present – and in what way writing about real people differs from writing about imaginary ones. This leads on to wider speculations regarding the extent to which the internet and an ever more globalised and interconnected world influence what we write, in particular biofictions.

Keywords: Bedlam trilogy, Bethlem Royal Hospital, biofiction, Richard Dadd, William Godwin, Benjamin Haydon, historical fiction, William Charles Hood, John Martin, J. M. W. Turner.

My three neo-Victorian novels in the Bedlam trilogy – *Nina in Utopia* (2010), *The Fairy Visions of Richard Dadd* (2013), and *The King of the Vast* (forthcoming with Peter Owen) – all started as historical fiction before diverging and developing into biofiction. In this chapter, I trace the novels' inception and evolution, the interconnections between the two modes of writing, and the latter's implications for the repurposing of historical and biographical fact into fiction. Moreover, by reflecting on the creative process, I seek to account for the abiding fascination which the nineteenth century continues to exert over my own writerly imagination as well as our wider cultural consciousness. In doing so, I interrogate the extent to which neo-Victorian fiction, especially biofiction, contributes to a deeper understanding of the Victorian age, or a more cursory and stereotypical, distorted/distorting conception of the period imbued with our own times' intellectual biases.

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1. Nina and the Victorian Woman

One morning about twelve years ago I was lying in bed, half awake, when I saw the image of a young woman in Victorian mourning clothes crossing a busy modern road. She did not fade like most dreams and daydreams but lurked, to borrow Henry James's words, "in the vague limbo of those ghosts we have conjured but not exorcised, looking for a situation, awaiting a niche and a function" (James 1991: xxxix). This persistent young woman became the titular heroine of *Nina in Utopia*. Nina visits modern-day London and, as a tourist here, gets it all wrong, believing we live in a utopia, where all are equal and the evils of money, violence and war have been conquered.

I suspect that many writers, like myself, do not consciously 'invent' characters. Rather, as we begin writing, the characters simply spring into existence, moving around the writer's inner theatre. It is only now, after completing these three novels, that I can ask myself where my fictional protagonist Nina came from, as well as those other characters representing actual nineteenth-century once-living subjects. Nina was born out of that initial vision and grew in the rich soil of the Victorian novels I have been reading all my life. My emotional history as a writer could be traced by my intense relationship with fiction: my imagination was formed by reading, and many of the novels I read were written in the nineteenth century. So too were the heroines that inspired me, to name just a few: Lewis Carroll's Alice, Louisa M. Alcott's Jo, Emily Brontë's Cathy, her sister's Jane Eyre, William Makepeace Thackeray's Becky Sharpe, Henry James's Maisie, Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer, Thomas Hardy's Bathsheba and Eustacia Vye... As I write their names, they fizz with life and are as vivid to me, or more vivid even, than many 'real' people.

All these writers could be described as 'Victorian', yet the vitality of their characters transcends time. As a reader, I do not want fiction to stay at a playful distance but hope it will open the door to spacious rooms where I can lose myself. Through literature we expand our lives and, like the characters in my three novels, move backwards and forwards through time. I have read so many nineteenth-century novels and seen so many costume dramas that I feel, perhaps impertinently, that I have 'genuine' access to that century. My historical and biofictional writing becomes another means of imaginatively immersing myself in the period.

Our lives extend backwards to stories we read or heard as children. My father was born in 1910, and an old lady who befriended me when I was

a child was born in about 1880. When Isak Dinesen was asked why she did not write about modern times, she said: “I do, if you consider that the time of our grandparents, that just-out-of-reach time, is so much a part of us. We absorb so much without being aware” (Dinsen qtd. in Walter 1976: 13). Later in the interview she grew impatient and announced, “I am really three thousand years old and have dined with Socrates”, to which the interviewer responded, rather inadequately, “Pardon?” (Dinsen qtd. in Walter 1976: 16). Yet for writers, imaginative time-travelling is nothing out of the ordinary or mystifying.

None of the seven books I wrote before *Nina in Utopia* required much historical research and, in fact, I never expected to write historical novels. Yet history has always fascinated me; when I went to university I chose to read History, rather than English, at King’s College London. My main interest then was in ancient and medieval history. At the end of my first year I went to Rome and, for a variety of reasons, ended up staying there and writing my first novel, *Under the Rainbow* (1978). It seemed to me then that writing academic essays was incompatible with imaginative writing, which, I already knew, was what I really wanted to do. In fact I intended to return to King’s and finish my course, but life intervened. My year at university did not deepen my understanding of the nineteenth century, as I spent it studying medieval history, but it did give me a lifelong passion for working in libraries and archives.

Although I identified so strongly with the already mentioned, nineteenth-century women characters, I did not, of course, want to be them. I have always felt very fortunate to be born when I was, just in time to benefit from feminism and the contraceptive pill and the acceptance of (at least theoretical) equality between the sexes. When that woman in Victorian mourning costume took root in my imagination and elbowed her way into my next novel, I had to consider where and when she came from. London is where I was born, grew up and live now, and most of my fiction has been set in either London or Italy. Choosing the novel’s exact time-frame, however, proved more difficult, because Victoria reigned for so long. When we use the adjective ‘Victorian’, we are talking about almost a century in which Britain and particularly the situation of women, changed enormously.

I chose to set *Nina in Utopia* in the early 1850s, because that was, from women’s point of view, the most repressive decade of all. Middle-class married women were more or less under house arrest, obliged to be

ministering angels – to their fathers, brothers, husbands, children – whether they wanted to be or not. Coventry Patmore’s immensely popular poem, ‘The Angel in the House’, written for his wife Emily and first published in 1854, offers a blueprint for the ideal Victorian wife. Middle-class, married British women in the 1850s were restricted by so many other things also: by their corsets and heavy crinolines; by the expectation that they would cease to be ladies if they worked; by laws which gave them no rights over their own property and no possibility of divorcing unless they were very rich; by doctors’ insistence that their little brains were too fragile to bear the strain of education and their bodies too delicate to be active. It is no coincidence that Nina’s husband, Charles, is a doctor.

It was generally believed that over-education would impede women’s menstruation and ability to bear children – so many children. It was not unusual for married women to become pregnant every year, with many miscarriages and stillborn babies in-between the live births, and no guarantee of the mother’s survival either. (The middle-aged Charlotte Brontë, for instance, tragically lost her life on account of her first ever pregnancy.) Puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation were all deemed ‘feminine disorders’, intermittently destabilising women’s bodies and minds, even to the point of serious illness, madness or death. Poor Nina loses both her children, Bella and Tommy, and is understandably traumatised by the experience. It was not nostalgia that fuelled my novel but horror: during the 1850s, serious reading and a desire for long solitary walks, among various other inclinations and activities, were considered symptoms of insanity in women. Judith Flanders succinctly sums up the case:

Women were prone to madness: their reproductive functions made this so. Therefore any behaviour that was unconventional, uncomfortable or unusual could be dismissed, and women brought to heel. (Flanders 2003: 212)

I would certainly have been considered mad, I muttered to myself as I sat in the British Library doing my research. A whalebone corset pinching my flesh! A straitjacket!

Perhaps unsurprisingly, corsets and straitjackets became part of my story. That is to say, I borrowed the actual physical and psychological

constraints that ‘real’ Victorian women were subjected to, but applied them to a fictional character. Nina is not based on any particular ‘real’ person but is entirely imaginary. When Nina returns to her own time, she tells her husband she has seen our supposedly utopian future and shows him drawings she has done of our London. He thinks she is mad and has her confined to Bethlem trussed up in a straitjacket, which the humane Dr William Charles Hood removes. Nina’s corset remains with her lover in twenty-first-century London.

2. Richard Dadd and William Charles Hood

Up to this point, I thought I was writing a Gothic fantasy and assumed that a lunatic asylum in the 1850s would have been a horrific place, like the Bedlam represented in Hogarth’s *Rake’s Progress* (1732-33). However, when I visited the archives of the Bethlem Royal Hospital, I discovered to my surprise that in the early 1850s the hospital was reformed by a remarkable man, namely the aforementioned Dr William Charles Hood (1824-1870). One of the inmates at this time was the artist Richard Dadd (1817-1886), whose wonderful painting, *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* (1855-64), has always intrigued me. In 1843, at the age of twenty-six, Dadd, a promising young artist, murdered his father and was committed as a criminal lunatic for the rest of his life, first in the Bethlem hospital in Lambeth – the historical ‘Bedlam’, now occupied by the Imperial War Museum – before being transferred to Broadmoor in Berkshire, following its opening in 1863. I was moved by the story of this sensitive tortured man, who somehow managed to carry on painting and drawing until his death in 1886.

And so real people began to populate my fantasy, and my fiction became biofiction. I felt a thrill of fear when I realised that I found Richard Dadd so fascinating that I had to write about him. It seemed presumptuous to write about a real person, particularly one with such a tragic destiny. Of course, any characters a writer imagines into her or his novels feel real – but there is a crucial difference. In a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Alison Lurie writes about the way the *roman-à-clef*, so popular in the last century, has given way to novels in which “the methods of literary abduction are less subtle” (Lurie 2016: 40). She is referring to novels about writers, but her words apply equally to novels like mine about painters: “The advantages of this method are clear: the writer both avoids lawsuits

and attracts attention, since everybody today seems to want to read about celebrities” (Lurie 2016: 40). Indeed, the bulk of neo-Victorian biofiction, including my own, is about such dead but still eulogised (or else infamous) celebrities.

When writers use or abuse real people in this way, are they doing the same thing as biographers – i.e. ‘cannibalising’ their subjects à la Rudyard Kipling’s well-known admonition?¹ While writing this chapter, I put this question to two friends, Hilary Mantel, the award-winning writer of historical fiction, and Lyndall Gordon, well-known for her literary biographies of the Brontës and Henry James, among others, to see what they thought. Mantel wrote back:

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

You can’t keep your character in the middle distance, as a biographer does. You must be very close. [...] I had a conversation with [the historical fiction writer] Lawrence Norfolk once about our common dislike of making up the weather. Yet you will make up the workings of the heart. (Mantel 2015: n.p., un-bracketed ellipses in the original)

Mantel identified both important similarities (extensive research, use of evidence, avoidance of ‘pure’ or uninformed speculation) and crucial differences (the role of imagination, closeness to/distance from the subject) between the historical fiction writer’s and biographer’s craft. My own approach to writing about Richard Dadd was to “imagine thoroughly” and guess a great deal whilst sticking to the heartbreakingly bare facts of his life: forty-three years in Bethlem and then in Broadmoor. So much silence. In contrast to Mantel, Gordon replied that when she simply does not know what happened in someone’s life, she leaves a gap: “the biographical gap is where a novelist’s work begins, and it’s a view that makes the two genres complementary” (Gordon 2015: n.p.). In these terms, ‘filling in the gaps’

constitutes both the biofiction writer's ethical duty and potentially unethical temptation.

At first those gaps seemed terrifying to me. Although I had read everything that had been published about Dadd that I could find, I still could not 'hear' his voice. Eventually, I experienced a breakthrough when I visited the Bethlem archives, in Beckenham in Kent. The archivist, Colin Gale, laid out various documents for me, including the huge register nineteenth-century patients signed when they first entered the hospital. It also contained a dispiriting account of their progress, or lack of it, in an age when physicians did not think it necessary to make detailed notes. 'No change' was considered an adequate description, repeated month after month. Online resources and microfiches are invaluable tools for researchers, but nothing beats the excitement of holding a volume that would have been touched by the person you are trying to re-imagine and bring back to life on the page. I wanted to know what kind of routine Dadd would have had during his years in the hospital and saw the records of the food he and the other inmates would have eaten in the 1850s, the decade when the first two novels of my Bedlam trilogy are set. Touching those documents and seeing Dadd's work in the intimate little gallery at the Archives finally gave me the courage to give him a voice. I started to imagine his inner life, a developing friendship between the painter and Hood, and the conversations they might have had. Gradually, the two men became as vivid as Nina in my mind.

In *Nina in Utopia*, Richard Dadd appears only as a minor character, seen by others. Yet I knew even then that he was so alive to me that I also needed to give him a novel of his own, in which he had to speak in the first person, and so I began to write *The Fairy Visions of Richard Dadd*. His mental illness was probably what we would now call paranoid schizophrenia, and most schizophrenic writing is incoherent. Written to accompany his extraordinary painting, the unfinished *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*, the long poem 'Elimination of a Picture & its Subject' is confused and rambling, although it does have one magnificent verse, which I borrowed for the ending of my novel:

But whether it be or be not so
You can afford to let this go

For nought as nothing it explains
And nothing from nothing nothing gains.
(Dadd qtd. in Allderidge 1974: 129)

Like the great painting it certainly does not explain or ‘eliminate’, this strange poem is imbued with secrecy and mystery. Strangeness and obscurity are attractive qualities in art – and biofiction – but I knew my novel would be not readable unless the narrative voice was lucid. The biofiction writer does not seek to extract and present “nothing from nothing”, but ‘something from something’, adding detail and complexity to rather than obscuring the subject.

In the 1850s, the resident physician and superintendent in Bethlem hospital was William Charles Hood. He was a great reformer whose 1854 pamphlet, *Suggestions for the Future Provision of Criminal Lunatics*, I read. Hood’s voice – intelligent, passionate yet obsessed with statistics and class – came over strongly. He worked tirelessly to improve conditions in the hospital, where he removed bars from the windows, banned the use of mechanical restraints, furnished the wards with books and pictures, and encouraged patients to occupy themselves constructively. Hood and his colleague Dr Alexander Morison, visiting physician to the hospital, both collected Dadd’s work, and so, amongst other things, Dadd’s story is an example of art therapy *avant la lettre*. Hence the paintings are a significant presence in my biofiction and in the biofictional Dadd’s characterisation also.

Hood campaigned to close down the grim and overcrowded wing for criminal lunatics, where Dadd was incarcerated for thirteen years. In my novel, Hood stares out of his study window at the grim Home Office-run block and reflects that “[t]hose dark buildings, unhealthy and overcrowded, are our skeleton cupboards. The law that built them is an ass that must be whacked into the nineteenth century” (Miller 2013: 25). In a sense, Hood becomes the anachronistic mouthpiece of the writer’s/reader’s twenty-first-century sensibilities, critical of the failings of the period’s institutions and ideologies.

After years of writing to the Home Office, Hood finally managed to move Dadd to a comparatively peaceful ward in the main building of the hospital. In 1857, the year in which my second neo-Victorian novel is set, Dadd had just been transferred to this light and airy ward overlooking the

hospital gardens. Writing my biofiction, I imagined that Dadd must have experienced the transition akin to a sea change: “I sink gratefully into the mattress, the soft mattress of M4 so unlike the straw stuffed lice infested one in my old dungeon” (Miller 2013: 35). In these improved conditions, the real-life Dadd began to do his best work. He was given studio space and began work on two of his most celebrated paintings: *Contradiction: Oberon and Titania* (1854-58), which Hood commissioned, and the already mentioned *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke*, which Dadd gave to the Bethlem steward, George Henry Haydon.²

The biblical title of another work, *The Flight Out of Egypt* (1849-50),³ was not chosen by Dadd himself, who had no time for Christianity and believed he was descended from the ancient Egyptian god Osiris, whose catspaw he was. This obsession was fertile ground for imagining the voices he heard. Indeed, I wonder whether my choice of Dadd as subject was not at least in part encouraged by my analogous propensity, as a biofiction writer, to ‘hear’ and channel voices – albeit historical rather than ‘divine’ voices – into novels. The painter’s mental illness was probably hereditary, since of the seven Dadd siblings, four were considered insane at the time of their death. Dadd’s breakdown appears to have been triggered by his Grand Tour, when he probably smoked hashish. While travelling in the Middle East in 1842, Dadd wrote to his friend, the painter William Powell Frith:⁴

the excitement of these scenes has been enough to turn the brain of an ordinary weak-minded person like myself, and often I have lain down at night with my imagination so full of wild vagaries that I have really and truly doubted my own sanity. (Dadd qtd. in Frith 1888: 62)

My novel begins with an invented scene when Frith comes to visit his old friend in hospital, as the reader is invited to do in my biofiction of Dadd. Though I am not comparing biofiction to ‘mad’ imaginings, it certainly evinces an affinity for subjects’ “wild vagaries”. Neo-Victorian biofiction in particular displays an evident predilection for the peculiar and the eccentric, which sets its protagonists apart from their fellow Victorians, while also typifying the stereotypical ‘strangeness’ of the period from today’s point of view.

3. John Martin

The third novel in my Bedlam trilogy, *King of the Vast* (forthcoming), was triggered by ‘John Martin: Apocalypse’, an exhibition I saw at Tate Britain in 2011. Martin (1789-1854), who came from a very poor background, showed early promise as a painter and moved to London when he was just seventeen. There he made friends with artists and writers and managed to develop from a tradesman, who painted onto china and glass, into one of the most successful painters in Regency and early Victorian London. In 1819, his acclaimed painting, the monumental *The Fall of Babylon*, sold for 400 guineas, and his later paintings, mainly illustrations of Milton and the Bible and mezzotints, likewise had enormous success. Nonetheless, his often melodramatic work was despised by the artistic establishment, and he carried on a lifelong feud with the Royal Academy. Martin was also very interested in theology, science, engineering and geology and had distinguished friends in those fields as well as in the arts. This makes Martin an ideal candidate for biofiction, since his pursuit and diverse circle capture ‘the spirit of the age’, making him a representative Victorian in spite of his individualism, which I sought to convey. For instance, Martin spent many years, and thousands of pounds, on elaborate plans for improving London, foreseeing that the population of the city would increase to ten million and that clean water and better sewage would be needed. In one sense, the real-life Martin’s visionary character and anticipation of the future bring him closer to modern-day subjectivities, allowing readers to more readily identify with his biofictional counterpart. Although Martin’s engineering projects failed, in that they were not carried out, he influenced later planners, including Sir Joseph William Bazalgette (1819-1891), whose embankment shares some features of Martin’s designs.

In 1829, Martin’s brother Jonathan, who was eight years older and semi-literate, set fire to York Minster, because he believed God told him to do so. Jonathan might have been hanged as an arsonist, if his brother had not paid for the best barrister in England to defend him. Henry Peter Brougham (1778-1868), who later became Lord Chancellor, got Jonathan off on a plea of insanity despite his client’s magnificently logical insistence that he was not mad, because he said that God would not have taken a madman to do His work. Jonathan remained in Bethlem as a criminal lunatic until he died, at the age of fifty-six, in 1838. As a celebrity madman, he was

given his own room, but conditions were much harsher than when Dadd was there two decades later. Jonathan was chained much of the time.

I decided to write a *Doppelgänger* novel about John and Jonathan Martin, the assured insider and his outsider brother.⁵ Jonathan's London's *Overthrow* (1830), for instance, is a kind of pastiche of his brother's immensely successful *Fall of Babylon*. So I returned to the Bethlem Archives to study Jonathan's strange drawings and the treatment he would have received. In *King of the Vast*, John confronts Dr Edward Thomas Monro, the absentee physician of Bethlem, at a fashionable party. Unlike in my biofiction of Dadd, however, here it is the main protagonist rather than the progressive doctor who reflects the twenty-first-century writer's/reader's horror at the abusive conditions in the asylum:

'My brother was strapped to a revolving chair. The rapid motion made him bleed from the ears and nose and when we arrived he was unconscious.'

He [Monro] looks relieved. 'Oh, you mean the Rotatory Machine? This is the very latest treatment. How I wish laymen would not meddle in matters they cannot possibly understand.' (Miller forthcoming: 106)

The Rotatory Machine really was used to 'treat' mental patients at this time, but I have imagined a conversation between John Martin and Dr Monro for which there is no documentation, but which might have taken place, as both men frequented similar circles. In other words, I supplemented historical fact with feasibility. Monro knew many painters, including Turner, who appears in another scene in my novel.⁶ In his memoirs, John Martin's son, Leopold, relates that he and his father went to visit Turner's studio in Queen Anne Street, where it is not impossible that they might have encountered Munro.

Turner was aware that John Martin was desperately unhappy, due to the recent suicide of his nephew (Jonathan's son) and financial worries. He offered to lend his fellow painter money and, although he was notoriously secretive about his life as 'Admiral Booth' in Chelsea, Turner invited John Martin and his son to walk over there with him. Such anecdotes, which take up only a few lines in a memoir or letter, can be expanded like a ball of clay you knead and pull and stretch into an animated statue – cumulatively and

selectively, the writer forms them into a biofictional life. Martin, who narrates most of *King of the Vast* in the first person, feels guilty about his good fortune, and after Jonathan dies, he constantly imagines seeing him:

I look up at the roof and see Jonathan there, hovering in the air. Misery and strain have left his face and he is no longer angry with me, he indicates the tower and smiles as if to say, I will not burn this great cathedral down, as if he has made his peace with the established church. The sun pours through a stained glass window behind him and my brother becomes a bird and finally an angel, disintegrating into light and glowing colour. When I look again there is only sunlit dust cascading around me, as if time has become a fountain. (Miller forthcoming: 122)

This is based on a brief description of a religious experience John Martin had in Westminster Abbey, when he was making preliminary drawings for his painting of Queen Victoria's coronation (Feaver: 1975: 157). For the purpose of biofiction too, past time becomes a fountain from which the writer 'distils' past lives, enabling us to 'see' and 'hear' the dead for once.

4. The Victorians' Persistent Allure

Richard Dadd, William Charles Hood, and John and Jonathan Martin are not household names, and we know relatively little about them personally. Writing biofiction about very famous people seems to me an even more formidable challenge, because so much is already known about their private and public lives that there is significantly less space for invention. When I was writing *Nina in Utopia*, I discovered that Dickens sometimes attended the Bedlam Balls in the 1850s, but I mentioned him only in passing, at the end of the novel. I shrank from adding to the mass of posthumous appearances by the great man. However, many other famous people appear in my novels. Although Richard Dadd had comparatively few sane years in which to make friends, John Martin was unusually charming and sociable. As well as J. M. W. Turner, Edwin Henry Landseer, Edward William Godwin, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, King Leopold I of Belgium, Thomas Moore and Michael Faraday were all among his friends. I worried that I was indulging in a kind of historical namedropping

by introducing so many famous people and felt obliged to do a huge amount of background reading about each one to avoid inadvertent misrepresentation. Yet this same celebrity allure arguably contributes to today's public's on-going fascination with reading about nineteenth-century lives.

Why are we so attracted to the Victorians? Partly, I think, because so many of them, especially representatives of the middle and upper classes, strike us as much more confident and idealistic than us, though naively so at times. They believed that the world was getting better, that they could make a difference, that they belonged to a great country – beliefs called into question since, and perhaps never believed to begin with by Victorian minorities, the persecuted and the marginalised, such as the starving Irish, exploited factory workers, slum dwellers and homosexuals. Arguably, such 'UKIPish' nostalgia for old certainties is dangerously seductive to both writers and readers. Perhaps we cannot help hoping that, if only we could combine Victorian confidence with our own more progressive ideas about sex, gender and respect for other races, we could imagine a less baffling society than the one we find ourselves living in. Many of us are uncomfortable with our present and terrified of our future, not least in the light of the resurgence of nationalism, elitism and intolerance, even across Western developed nations. As far as Britain is concerned, the nineteenth century and the Second World War still seem to dominate the national consciousness, judging by the number of books, TV programmes and films about those two periods. It sometimes feels as if Britons are still fighting the Second World War, while simultaneously longing for the comforting identity of being British in the days of Empire and Victoria.

We love the clothes, the Victorian conventions that we imagine ourselves courageously flouting, and the apparent rootedness of the people in their place, time, and communities,⁷ as in the *Cranford* series (2007), created by Sue Birtwistle and Susie Conklin and directed by Simon Curtis and Steve Hudson, or, more recently, *To Walk Invisible: The Brontë Sisters* (2017), both produced for BBC One. Scenes from such neo-Victorian works are so vivid they become internalised, almost like our own memories. Although politicians talk about national identity, it often feels as if the British people do not really have one. Yet I would argue that, if they do, it is bound up with collective fantasies about those two historical periods: when elegant people strode around the pink stained world having thrillingly

furtive love affairs; when their grandchildren, still beautifully dressed, heroically fought and beat the Nazis. In spite of the violence and upheaval associated with both periods, they continue to fascinate and even comfort many people: these were the times when Britain was on the right side and its citizens could feel patriotic without postcolonial guilt. Of course it's all nonsense, but when were heroic national myths ever rational?

If my neo-Victorian biofictions do not engage specifically with British colonial depredations and imperialist atrocities, as do other works in this genre, they nonetheless interrogate some of the pitfalls of Victorian idealism at home, as in the case of the early punitive asylum regime at Bethlem. Writers of historical fiction pick up on these fertile contradictions between documented and reconstructed histories, between mythical and ignominious versions of the pasts, and so move back and forth between the two, both as regards the collective lives of nations and the individual lives of historical subjects turned biofictional protagonists.

Although each of the three novels in my *Bedlam* trilogy is self-contained, they are linked by the themes of art, madness and time travel. While the nineteenth century has always felt quite familiar to me, I found myself incapable of staying put there. The question 'What would they think of us?' kept bubbling up in my mind, and so in each of my neo-Victorian texts the main character visits or dreams of twenty-first-century London. These modern sections proved the hardest to write. I went for long walks around London, trying to imagine how someone from the nineteenth century would view today's city and its people, while still allowing for the protagonists' individual perspectives. To some extent, of course, we always see what we already know. Nina notices how relations between men and women have changed, perceiving "a wonderful city where men and women live quite freely and without lies and hypocrisy" (Miller 2010: 236). Dadd, who is bisexual in my novel, notices that same sex love is now permitted. Sitting on the steps of St Paul's, he watches two young men kissing, noting how "[t]hey are beautiful, shameless, and nobody except me is staring at them", before they "walk off hand in hand. My heart soars as I watch them and will them to be happy together" (Miller 2013: 250). Martin, who is obsessed with his plans for improving London, is struck by twenty-first-century inventions and engineering feats. His own passions determine the selective focus of his gaze, as when he dreams that he rides a high-speed train:

We shoot off at nauseating speed and my eyes are assaulted by lights. The night city appears now in crystalline solidity, I am inside a brilliant diorama and our train is a worm, burrowing through the city's brilliant intestines; lights, towers of light, bridges and arches and fountains of light flash past. We are flying through infernal tunnels and there is a terrible exhilaration in our defiance of the laws of gravity. Another train approaches us, a glassy illuminated serpent. I shut my eyes and wait for the inevitable smash. (Miller forthcoming: 145)

In one of the real-life Martin's last paintings, *The Last Judgement* (1852-53), a railway train (together with sinners, elephants and horses) falls into the bottomless pit of hell. I attempted to imagine how Martin would have responded to modern technology, had he actually been able to visit his future, our present, rather than merely envisioning it. And, of course, just as my bio/fictional Victorians view our modern-day lives through the lens of their own concerns and obsessions, we as postmodern writers/readers look back onto nineteenth-century lives through *our* own intellectual preoccupations and biases: including still persisting gender inequalities, mental health issues, the cultural capital of art, urban reform, and accelerating technological innovation. At least in part, we cannot but reconstruct the Victorian period generally – and real-life Victorian subjects in particular – as our own uncanny *Doppelgänger*.

5. Biofictional Cybertrails, Beginnings and Endings

Neo-Victorianism and neo-Victorian biofiction are no longer confined to Britain. Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger, the guest editors of the 2015 special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* on *Neo-Victorianism and Globalisation: Transnational Dissemination of Nineteenth-Century Cultural Texts*, appropriately entitle their introduction, 'What is Global Neo-Victorianism?', as they explore Victorianism's increasingly global reach. Similarly, Cora Kaplan ends her study *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007) by situating neo-Victorianism "in a much wider, transnational as well as national debate [...] about historical memory and the direction of the political future in which we, as readers and citizens, do have a voice and a role to play" (Kaplan 2007: 162). The same, however,

applies to the economic future, where reading becomes another form of consumption. Our Anglocentric historical fantasy of the Victorian age (among other periods) is one of the few things we still manufacture in Britain and export with a vengeance. The Victorians – including their biofictional celebrities – are still, so to speak, a major currency on the foreign exchange market, as well as a useful, inexhaustible commodity helping to reduce Britain’s trade deficit.

That same fantasy also has a flourishing life of its own on the internet, which has changed writers’ lives as well as everyone else’s. A few years ago, I would not have thought of using the internet for ‘serious’ research to begin a new novel. Yet although I sit writing in a book-cluttered study and still love working in libraries and archives, I have discovered that you can Googlestalk the dead as well as the living. Amongst its many functions, the internet is a detective agency helping writers fill in the gaps in their subjects’ lives. For example, George Henry Haydon was the Steward at Bethlem from 1853 to 1889. He appears in each of my three novels, yet for a long time I could not discover much about him, and he remained a shadowy figure to me. Then, on the King’s College website, I found a fascinating PhD thesis by his descendant, Katherine Haydon. From this I learned that when Haydon was young, he went to Australia as an explorer and was a good artist and cartoonist, who contributed to *Punch*. He was married and, like Dr Hood, lived in the hospital – all crucial details for a novelist like myself to draw and elaborate upon.

I always find endings very hard to write, and the end of my trilogy proved particularly difficult, perhaps because of a sense of those biofictional voices falling silent one more. Somehow I had to tie all three novels together without making the bow so neat that it would look too gift-wrapped and slick. I felt that my trilogy had to close at Bethlem with John Martin’s daughter Izzie, who narrates the last few chapters. In my novel, she has a tragic love affair, which is of course imaginary, as we know nothing about her private life. The real Izzie had been her father’s amanuensis and never married. Later, when her sister Jess died, Izzie brought up her nephews and nieces and also became joint manager of the Sir John Soane’s Museum in Holborn, London. In my novel, in 1878, twenty-five years after her father’s death and just before her own, Izzie receives a (fictional) letter signed by Haydon, asking her to collect a bundle of drawings and writings by her Uncle Jonathan, which have just turned up in a cupboard in Bethlem.

Although there is no record of any such discovery or subsequent visit by Izzie to the asylum, it is at least feasible that there could have been; that is to say, my biofiction also does not violate any known biographical facts.

For a long time I failed to imagine this final scene between Izzie and Haydon who are, perhaps, the most likeable characters in the trilogy. Then, after weeks of worry and insomnia, I discovered on the Bethlem website blog that this sympathetic and humane man had a sister, Anna Maria, who was admitted as a patient to Bethlem in 1866 and, like Richard Dadd's younger brother George, remained there as an incurable patient for thirty-three years until her death in 1899. This probably explains why Haydon stayed on so long as Steward from 1853 until 1889, shortly before his own death two years later.

This sad coincidence chimed with something that had struck me during my research – that mental illness often does seem to run in artists' families. The Dadds are a particularly striking example in point. The Steward's own brother, Samuel James Bouverie Haydon, was a successful sculptor. It also seemed to reinforce my *Doppelgänger* theme: the double or shadow self of an apparently successful and competent person, like John Martin, might be a sibling, Jonathan, who cannot cope with the world at all. Yet the hopeless sibling, like Jonathan Martin in my novel, might in certain ways see further than the sane brother or sister who 'makes it' in the everyday outside world. This biofictional doubling, employing contrasting celebrity and lesser known figures or those largely forgotten in popular cultural consciousness, allowed me to convey a more inclusive chiaroscuro view of the period, rather than resorting to recreating (and reducing) its inhabitants' complex lives to simple black and white.

6. Personalising Memory, Indulging Speculation

Nonetheless, the biofiction writer almost inevitably resorts to iconic markers of a period, which from one point of view could also be regarded as potentially reductionist, namely as employing a sort of convenient 'shorthand' for the historical context. Yet to disregard these 'signature' occurrences and their effects on Londoners at the time would be equally unrealistic and disingenuous. Two such crucial events, the great fire of Westminster in 1834 and the Great Exhibition in 1851, in particular caught my imagination. As a boy new to London, in the second novel, Richard Dadd follows the crowds to watch the fire. The same night (in the third

novel), John Martin also gawks at it with his daughter and nephew. Nina remembers visiting the Great Exhibition with her family, when her children were still alive and her marriage to Charles was still happy. The Great Exhibition was a moment when that enviable Victorian confidence in progress reached its culmination, and, of course, it also formed a chunk of the London we know now, because ‘Albertopolis’ was built from the profits. I thought that John Martin, with his keen interest in planning and engineering, must have been involved, but it was only thanks to the internet that I was able to confirm this by looking at the online catalogue for the Great Exhibition. In a sense, personal memory preserves cultural memory even as the latter fades or is lost, as in the extensive damage caused by the 1834 fire, only to be reconstructed with variation, as in the subsequent rebuilding of the new Houses of Parliament. Biofiction similarly recreates but also inevitably changes the past through historical subjects’ re-imagined personal experiences and memories of collective events.

There is nothing quite like the excitement of following a cybertrail and finally ‘meeting’ the person you hoped to encounter. I could have invented a man who was an artist and engineer and showed his work at the Great Exhibition, but the thrill of discovery would not have been the same. There is an analogy here with tracing one’s ancestry, another pursuit I have enjoyed.⁸ Writing and reading about real people really is different from writing and reading about imaginary characters, because we know that actual living, feeling people once experienced the depicted trials and tribulations, as well as joys and successes – even if these may have been different in specifics and nuance from their biofictional re-imagining. This enables a more intimate kind of communion or even identification with our historical ‘Others’.

I have found that the hardest thing about writing about people from another century is to enter into their emotional and intellectual world without imposing my own views on them. For example, I love silent films, but when a few years ago I saw D. W. Griffiths’ *Intolerance* (1916), an epic of ancient Babylon, I found it corny and schmaltzy. Yet when I discovered that its sets had been inspired by John Martin’s paintings, I had to watch it again and tried to do so from the point of view of someone who has never seen a film before. It became a wondrous, even miraculous experience: an entirely new way of telling a story, with vast crowds dancing and fighting, huge faces expressing emotion, and an invisible orchestra. Such temporary

self-forgetting and openness towards ‘Otherness’ seems to me to be an essential feature of both biofictional writing and reading.

As a half-Jewish agnostic, I find religious faith quite hard to understand, but it is impossible to get close to those nineteenth-century people without identifying with their soul-searching. As Virginia Woolf says acidly of George Eliot’s heroines, “That is their problem. They cannot live without religion, and they start out on the search for one when they are little girls” (Woolf 1979: 159). In my first neo-Victorian novel, *Nina*, whose mother was Catholic, is not devout, but her sister Henrietta is a fanatical evangelist. Charles, Nina’s husband, agrees to hold family prayers to please his sister-in-law but snores through most of them. Of the real characters in my trilogy, Richard Dadd, as already mentioned, believed in Osiris rather than the Anglican God-father. The Martin brothers’ mother, Isabella, read to them constantly from the *Bible*, particularly from the *Book of Revelation*, and frequently told them that there was “a God to serve, and a Hell to shun, and all liars and swearers are burned in Hell” (Feaver 1975: 2). This left its mark on all her children. Jonathan became what Dr Hood called a “religious monomaniac” and John, who knew the *Bible* almost by heart, believed that “all that is good flows from God” (Hood and Martin qtd. in Pendered 1923: 231). His friendships with scientists later convinced him that the *Bible* was not literally true and that the world was created long before circa 5550 BC, as Genesis tells us. It is part of my job as a novelist to empathise with people who are unlike me; in fact it is that kind of self-projection or ventriloquising that I find most exciting when writing. It is doubtful whether we can ever fully escape from ourselves and the assumptions and prejudices of our own time. But we can certainly try and, to some degree, doing so may help us develop greater tolerance for difference in our present-day society also.

Sex is another problem for biofiction writers. A hundred years ago, most novels published now would have been banned for obscenity, as were works by D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce, and the great Victorian novelists were far more restricted than the Modernists. Dickens, as we now know, had his own problems with his sexuality and knew that he would lose his status as the nation’s favourite author if he wrote realistically about women and marriage. Henry James envied the frankness of Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, and many of his later circumlocutions were an attempt to write about human passions without

shocking his readers. When Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* was published in 1895, the Bishop of Wakefield is said to have been so shocked that he threw his copy of the novel into the fire. Hardy, like Dickens, wanted to be respected and respectable, and the furore upset him so much that he never wrote another novel. Yet arguably, post Freud and psychoanalytic theory, a neo-Victorian biofiction would appear suspect *unless* it included explicit depictions of sex, now deemed a defining and formative constituent of subjectivity. The biofiction writer, then, must not only take into account the Victorian sensibilities of her/his historical subjects, but also the expectations and worldviews of modern-day readers.

The time-travel trope in my trilogy, of course, makes it easier to do this. At the beginning of the first novel, Nina is a child-woman whose husband Charles sees her as a "bright household fairy", who "presides [...] over the pure values and sweet delights of our home" (Miller 2010: 45). In twenty-first-century London, she meets Jonathan, a young architect, and when she returns to her own time after disappearing for three days, Charles says she "seems quite another person, sullen and angry and undutiful" (Miller 2010: 106) – hardly surprising in view of her exposure to the present age's greater sexual freedoms for women. Charles is swift to suspect her of infidelity, announcing with an earnest pomposity that strikes modern minds as comic: "When a woman has lost that inestimable jewel, her virtue, she can never be the same again" (Miller 2010: 109). Yet we must be wary of what Edward Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity" (Thompson 1980: 12); not least, we should remember that one day we too will be judged by it. Our descendants will perhaps despise us for our obsession with sex just as much as we snigger at Victorian prudery and double standards. Meanwhile, we are fortunate in our freedom to write openly about sexuality, and most neo-Victorian biofiction arguably revels in this freedom.⁹

Guessing at the sexuality of real people is, of course, more difficult and extremely presumptuous. In 1857, Richard Dadd completed a watercolour called *The Child's Problem*, which he gave to Charles Neville, the head attendant at Bethlem Hospital and, later, at Broadmoor.¹⁰ The eye focuses at once on the traumatised face of a little boy. His left hand is poised to move a chess piece on a table – or is it hovering just above the cock of an arrogant looking old man in a curious headdress sleeping in a chair? On the wall behind them is an anti-slavery picture and a statue of

Ceres as a naked woman kneeling. This watercolour screamed ‘child abuse’ to me and, acting on that hunch, I invented an effete aristocrat, Sir Harley, who grooms and abuses the thirteen-year-old Dadd. My biofiction thus offers a possible contributing factor to Dadd’s eventual mental decline from apparent hereditary causes. The abuse also serves as Dadd’s quasi initiation to homosexuality. Later in the novel, Dadd falls unrequitedly in love with Haydon, to whom, as already noted, he gave his masterpiece, *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke*, perhaps accounting for such a generous gift. In this way, biofiction writers like myself dovetail and subordinate biographical facts to the overarching “aesthetic structure” or shape of the novel; as in the case of “fictional biographers”, this technique tries to capture not just the symbolic essence of the historical subject, but also “the potentialities lived out only in the mind, which make up the full reality of a life” (Schabert 2016: 287, 289). Where sexuality did not seem to ‘fit’ the essence of a biofictional protagonist, I chose not to include such fictional conjectures. The real-life John Martin was, I think, rather puritanical. When he was nineteen, he married Susan Garrett, who was eight years older, and they had six surviving children. There were rumours that they grew apart later because of her extravagance and insistence on being addressed as Lady Martin, after John was given a Belgian knighthood by his friend King Leopold. Although many of his friends were cheerfully promiscuous, I could not discover any breath of scandal about him. Accordingly, I have not invented any for my biofictional John Martin either. The biofiction writer, then, treads a fine balance between biographical factuality and imaginative speculation, between complete immersion in another’s life and a critical-ethical distance from the biofictional subject.

7. Coda: A Strange Nostalgia

Am I nostalgic for this nineteenth-century world I never knew? I must admit I feel bereft now that I have finished my trilogy – and am planning a novel set in eighteenth-century Rome and London by way of consolation. Again, imaginary characters will mingle with real people. Biofiction, like the novel more generally, is a generous form, a battered suitcase into which almost anything can be thrown. Novelists (and readers) pick it up and travel greedily from century to century, and from life to life, hoping for that dinner date with Socrates, Queen Victoria, Dickens – or, as the case may be, with Dadd, Hood, the Martin brothers, Haydon, or Izzie Martin. There is

arguably an ethical distinction between writing novels about invented characters and writing biofiction, as many critics and other writers on ‘biographical fiction’ or biofiction have noted.¹¹ While there are no agreed upon general ‘rules’, each writer makes implicitly ethical choices as to what ‘facts’ and speculations to include and leave out, to highlight and dramatise. This is something I felt strongly, as I attempted to bring Richard Dadd, John Martin and their milieux (back) to life. Unlike in the case of Nina, who was my beloved puppet, there were certain things I could not make myself make them do. Thinking back forty years to myself as a student, I believed then that there was an unbridgeable gulf between studying history and writing imaginative fiction. In the novels I am writing now, I realise that I have built a bridge across that gulf and totter precariously across it.

Notes:

1. In *Something of Myself: For My Friends Known and Unknown* (1937) and in earlier correspondence from 1932, Kipling described biography as “High Cannibalism” and “Higher Cannibalism” respectively (Kipling 2004: 134 and f.n.)
2. *Contradiction: Oberon and Titiana* is now in Andrew Lloyd-Webber’s private collection, while *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* (1855-64) is held by Tate Britain.
3. *The Flight Out of Egypt* is also held by Tate Britain.
4. Frith would later produce those quintessentially Victorian paintings, *Derby Day* (1856-58) and *Ramsgate Sands* (1852-54).
5. There was a third Martin brother, William, a magnificently eccentric inventor and philosopher who produced hundreds of pamphlets with exhausting interminable titles like *A Short Outline of the Philosopher’s Life From Being A Child In Frocks to This Present Day, After the Defeat of All Imposters, False Philosophers, Since the Creation...* (1833). The three brothers were sometimes referred to collectively as the ‘Mad Martins’, but arguably John was not mad at all. It seems likely that the often straightened circumstances of the boys’ upbringing – their mother, Isabella, a devoutly religious woman had eloped with Fenwick Martin, a soldier/publican/fencing instructor who was usually in debt – seems to have contributed to the brothers’ oddness.

6. Turner also appears in my two earlier novels, as he would have taught both Dadd and Frith at the Royal Academy Schools, where the students found him ridiculous.
7. Yet this ‘rootedness’ may finally be no more than a retrospectively projected, highly selective illusion in view of the nineteenth-century flight from the countryside to industrial cities and mass emigration to the New World and the colonies.
8. Although I had heard many stories about my father’s family, when I actually found their names in a nineteenth-century census I was moved to tears.
9. This freedom extends to more transgressive, even criminal forms of sexuality, such as paedophilia, which feature in various neo-Victorian biofictions based on the life of Lewis Carroll and his relationship with Alice Liddell.
10. The image can be viewed on the Tate’s website at <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/jennifer-higgie-on-richard-dadds-childs-problem-1857>.
11. See, for instance, Michael Lackey’s comprehensive edited collection *Biographical Fictions: A Reader* (2017) on this topic.

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