

Biofiction, Heterobiography and the Ethics of Speaking of, for and as Another

Lucia Boldrini

Abstract: Novels that choose historical individuals as their protagonists—“biofiction” (Buisine 1990; Middeke and Huber 1999; more recently Lackey 2016) or, especially in the case of first-person narration, “heterobiography” (Boldrini 2012)—can be a powerful tool to reflect on historical and philosophical constructions of the human subject; on individual identity, its representations, its autonomy and/or relationality. Ethical questions are at the core of the form, insofar as it contends with the ethics of assuming another’s voice, of narrating another’s story, and therefore with the ethical implications of literary practices of representation. The historicity of that “another” sharpens the urgency of these questions, and also diffracts them into a myriad of related issues, including the different ethical horizons of distant historical times; the ethical duty of giving voice to those that have been historically silenced vs the ethical risk of speaking for (appropriating the voice of) another; the ethical dilemmas inherent in the disputed ownership of stories; the tension between individual and collective narratives; the potential violence of the demand of coherence intrinsic in narrativization; the inevitable gap between authorial words and lived life. This article examines these key question, illustrating them through the analysis of a range of textual examples narrated in the first and/or third person: Patricia Duncker’s 2015 *Sophie and the Sibyl* (in which the Sibyl of the title is the Victorian novelist George Eliot); Gavin McCrea’s 2015 *Mrs Engels* (narrated by Lizzie Burns, Friedrich Engels’s lover, partner and finally wife); Monica Truong’s 2003 *The Book of Salt* (narrated by “Binh,” a figure based on Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas’s Vietnamese cooks); and Susan Sontag’s 1992 *The Volcano Lover* (based on William Hamilton, collector and British Ambassador to the court of Naples in the 18th Century, his wife Emma, famous for her poses impersonating legendary figures, Admiral Horatio Nelson, and various other real and imaginary characters); the consideration of the latter also touches on Anna Banti’s *Artemisia* (1947), centred on the early modern painter Artemisia Gentileschi.

Keywords: biofiction; heterobiography; ethics of representation; Patricia Duncker; Gavin McCrea; Monique Truong; Susan Sontag; Anna Banti

Author: Lucia Lucia Boldrini is Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the Centre for Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research interests include fictional biography and autobiography; Joyce, Dante and modernist medievalism; comparative literature; and literature on and from the Mediterranean area. Among her books: *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction* (Routledge, 2012); *Joyce, Dante, and the Poetics of Literary Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); and as editor, *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, with Julia Novak (Palgrave, 2017)(Email: L.Boldrini@gold.ac.uk).

标题: 传记小说、他者传记以及以他者为主题、为他者发声、作为他者的叙述伦理

摘要: 选择历史人物作为主人公的小说，即“传记小说”（这一名称最早由比希纳于1990年提出，米戴克和胡贝尔在1999年沿用，拉基在2016年也提到过），或尤其是以第一人称叙述的“他者传记”（由博尔德里尼于2012年提出），可以成为从历史和哲学角度建构反思人类主体性、个体身份、文学再现、自主性和（或）关系性的有力工具。伦理问题是这种文学形式的核心，因为这涉及到利用他者声音、讲述他者故事的伦理冲突，因此也和文学实践的再现的伦理意蕴相冲突。“他者”的历史性加剧了这些伦理问题的紧迫性，也通过这些伦理问题衍射出诸多相关议题，包括时空差异导致的伦理视野的差异；为历史沉默者发声时所担负的伦理责任，为他者发声（挪用他者声音）所产生的伦理风险；具有争议的故事归属权内在的伦理困境；个体叙事与集体叙事之间的冲突；叙事过程中内在关联性被破坏的风险；作者话语与现实生活之间不可避免的鸿沟等。本文探讨了以上关键问题，并通过分析一系列以第一人称和（或）第三人称叙述的文本来阐述这些问题：帕特里夏·东克2015年出版的小说《索菲和西比尔》（小说标题中的西比尔是维多利亚时期的小说家乔治·艾略特）；加文·麦克2015年出版的小说《恩格斯夫人》（小说的叙述者莉齐·伯恩是弗里德里希·恩格斯的情人、伴侣，最终成为他的妻子）；莫妮卡·特朗2003年出版的小说《盐之书》（小说的叙述者阿彬的原型是格特鲁德·斯坦和爱丽丝·托克拉斯雇佣的越南裔厨师）；苏珊·桑塔格1992年出版的小说《火山爱人》（小说围绕收藏家、18世纪驻那不勒斯王国的英国大使威廉·汉密尔顿、以模仿神话人物出名的妻子艾玛、子爵霍雷肖·纳尔逊以及众多真实和虚构的人物展开）；安娜·班蒂1947年出版的小说《阿尔泰米西娅》也涉及到虚构的人物，主要讲述了早期现代派画家阿尔泰米西娅·真蒂莱斯基的故事。

关键词: 传记小说；他者传记；再现的伦理；帕特里夏·东克；加文·麦克雷；莫妮卡·特朗；苏珊·桑塔格；安娜·班蒂

作者简介：露西娅·博尔德里尼，伦敦大学英语和比较文学教授，伦敦大学戈德史密斯比较文学研究中心主任。她的研究兴趣包括：虚构性传记和自传，乔伊斯、但丁和具有现代性的中世纪主义，比较文学，关于和来自地中海区域的文学等。她的著作包括《他人的自传：历史主题与文学小说》（劳特利奇出版社，2012年）、《乔伊斯、但丁和文学关系诗学》（剑桥大学出版社，2001年）、与茱莉亚·诺瓦克共同撰写《生活写作实验：自传/传记与小说的交叉点》（帕尔格雷夫麦克米伦出版社，2017年）等。

In this paper I wish to consider some of the ethical questions raised by novels that choose historical individuals as their protagonists. While the presence in fiction of characters drawn from history is not a new phenomenon, novels that centre on them have increased exponentially over the last few decades, and have been recognized as a separate genre. Different terms have been used to describe these texts, but the label “biofiction,” originally used by Buisine in 1990 and later by, for example, Middeke and Huber, has acquired currency and has more recently been adopted and further popularized by Lackey. I too have contributed to the multiplication of terminology, using “heterobiography” to designate what may be seen as a subgroup of the broader category of biofiction: “autobiographies of others,” that is, novels presented as if written, fully or partially, in the grammatical first person by a historical personage (*auto-*), though of course written by someone else (thus, *hetero-*).¹ These biofictional narratives, whether written in the third or first person (that is, as if biographically or autobiographically), or, as is often the case, in a combination of these grammatical forms, can be a powerful tool to reflect on the changing historical, cultural and philosophical constructions of the human subject, on individual identity, its representations, its autonomy and/or relationality. Ethical questions are at the core of the form, insofar as it contends with the ethics of assuming another’s voice, of narrating another’s story, and therefore with the ethical implications of literary practices of representation. The historicity of that “another” sharpens the urgency of these questions, and also diffracts them into a myriad of related issues. I will outline the main ones in the next paragraphs, before turning to a selection of novels that allow us to consider the range of forms that these issues can take, and some of their ramifications. By their very nature, biofictional and heterobiographical texts posit a choice between two ethical positions: on the one hand there is the potential to give voice to, or tell the story of, someone whose voice

¹ See Boldrini, *Autobiographies of Others* 9-11 for a more extended discussion of the origins, rationale and implications of the term.

or story may have been forgotten, even erased from history, or whose perspective may need to be re-examined from a different angle. On the other hand, there is the appropriation of those subjects' voices or stories, without their consent, and with the effect of substituting one's own voice, one's own narrative reconstruction, for theirs. The choice of subject is crucial in this respect: the ethical implications of appropriating the voice of an emperor, a tyrant, a nobleman, or even a famous writer—of figures that have had the historical opportunity to speak for themselves or of having their stories celebrated—can be very different from those raised by the appropriation of the story or voice of someone who has not had the same opportunity, whether due to subordinated political or social position, or to lack of access to writing or publishing, or to illiteracy (I'm thinking, for example, for the first group, of Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's *Autobiografía del general Franco*, or of the many fictional rewritings of the life of Ovid, such as those by Horia, Malouf, Ransmayr, and Mincu; and, for the second group, of Peter Carey's narration of the semi-literate outlaw Ned Kelly, or, even more aptly, of Jean Bedford's narrative of Kelly's sister Kate; or of the working class servants of famous people such as Virginia Woolf's cook Nelly in Alicia Giménez Bartlett's *Una habitación ajena* and in Danièle Roth's *Bloomsbury, côté cuisine: roman*). And, of course, there are the cases of stories that are disputed, where different versions are given by different agents. A peculiar example of the latter is the already mentioned *Autobiografía del general Franco*, in which Franco's first-person, heterobiographical, self-aggrandizing narrative is countered by the (fictional) narrator's inability to put up with the narrative he is himself writing in the dictator's name, so that he answers back with his own perspective, that of the historically defeated.¹

The genre has thus an ethical dilemma at its core—either appropriation or silencing—with each choice involving the opposite ethical risk: either refuse the appropriation of another's voice but leave them without any voice; or give them the possibility of having their history represented, but at the cost of substituting one's voice for theirs, appropriating it, and with that, their identity. Inextricably connected to this dilemma is the explicit, sometimes even flaunted, historicity of the narratives' subjects, and the way their specific historical circumstances can affect the ethical texture of these questions, the way readers perceive and engage with them. The double nature of the protagonist-narrator as historical person and fictional character requires us to consider not only a possible ethical duty to historical

1 I have discussed this aspect of Vázquez Montalbán's novel in *Autobiographies of Others*, 168-177.

accuracy (and I say “possible” because the fact that these are novels authorizes, beyond any doubt, historical inaccuracy and invention), but also the relationship between different ethical horizons, that of the now and that of the historical time and place of the individual: how do the ethical concerns of the writer and of us as readers today re-cast, in the re-narrating, those of the individuals being narrated? We must differentiate them, no doubt—but is it possible (to what extent is it possible) to untangle them, separating our contemporary and subjective perspective from that of a historical subject who is now being reconstructed? To put it bluntly, is an objective ethical reading possible? Moreover, in their gesturing to biographical or autobiographical forms, these novels place the focus on the individual, yet their relationship with history very often involves a concern with larger historical phenomena, and therefore with collective subjects: how do they negotiate this relationship between the personal and the collective, a relationship that is both political and ethical?

It is within the frame provided by these questions that I want to discuss, very briefly in the space available and with no hope of doing justice to their richness, a range of biofictional and heterobiographical novels chosen to provide examples of diverse though related configurations, with distinct mixtures of invented and historical characters, each novel focusing to various extents on literary, historical, and (broadly conceived) political matters. The first two novels discussed below were published in 2015 and are set in the nineteenth century; in both, we encounter characters seeking to define ethical horizons for their time and the future. The subject of Patricia Duncker’s *Sophie and the Sibyl* is the novelist George Eliot, often seen as concerned with the articulation of an ethics of individual and human sympathy, though accused of hypocrisy by Duncker’s narrator. The political philosopher Friedrich Engels, seen through the eyes of his lover Lizzie Burns in Gavin McCrea’s *Mrs Engels*, is more concerned with the emancipation of collective subjects (the working class), yet, through biofiction’s focus on the individual, we also see him getting entangled in the paradoxical quandaries raised by the conflict between ethico-political principles and the difficulty of complying with the personal demands of those principles—demands that, as we shall see, may in themselves be underpinned by ethical violence. The next two books will allow us to consider further the ethical demands placed on writers that choose under-represented historical subjects, and to continue to explore the extent to which the aporias identified above may be intrinsic to the genre itself, drawing us readers too into these ethical quandaries and hypocrisies. This will be discussed in particular through Monique Truong’s choice of Gertrude Stein’s and Alice B. Toklas’s cook (or, in fact,

a composite of their Vietnamese cooks) in *The Book of Salt* (2003); and through Susan Sontag's both asserted and denied desire to speak for the underrepresented in *The Volcano Lover* (1992). We shall observe how these texts (as well as a fifth one, Anna Banti's *Artemisia*, of 1947) address the distance between the "now" of writing and the "then" of the subjects' lives and times, and how they seek to trace layers of history and links of inheritance across time, establishing a dialogue between subjects divided by centuries.

Patricia Duncker's *Sophie and the Sibyl* (2015) starts in Germany in 1872, as the German translation of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is being published in instalments by Duncker Verlag (the coincidence of the publisher's name and Patricia Duncker's is just that, a coincidence, but it provided the "starting point" for writing this novel (Duncker 288)). The Sibyl of the title is the formidable, intelligent, ugly Victorian novelist George Eliot, who scandalized her contemporaries by living with George Henry Lewes unmarried, and then, after his death, marrying a man much younger than her. Despite the scandalous life, Eliot is often seen as a moralist, even a heavy-handed one by some, as well as a major representative of ethical sympathetic realism. Eliot's novels, moreover, repeatedly place their characters in positions where they have to make choices (about themselves, about others) without having the knowledge of all the facts that may enable them to reach a balanced decision; situations in which the rational choice may contrast with their desires or their feeling of what is right; where they are, in other words, constantly faced by the necessity and inevitability, but also the imponderability, of ethics.

What is striking in Duncker's novel is the narrator's hostility to Eliot, whom she accuses of hypocrisy by "maintaining genteel fictions in her life that she seldom countenanced in her novels"; she is "a master of pretence"; "Her fiction championed the honesty she preached, but never practised"; she "clawed her way back into Victorian respectability by denying her fictional women the satisfied ambitions and desires she claimed for herself" (30). There is a black-and-white approach to judgement in this narrator that accepts no complexity or nuancing of moral choice, whether within Eliot's life or her fiction. However, something interesting happens *around* the narrative, in the paratexts of Epigraphs and Afterword. First, we find in one of the Epigraphs that the narrator metafictionally distrusts her own author (Duncker—or, insofar as this is also a construct of the (para)text, "Duncker"):

our author is one of those sentimental people who need to admire their chosen heroes and heroines. She cannot bear it if her appointed gods turn out to be made of flesh and blood ... she has scores to settle with ... Mrs. Lewes, but she

adores [her]. ... Her vindictive little game is undermined by love.

The author's vindictive little game is undermined by love—these are quite striking words: one would expect the opposite, that love (an emotion we normally regard as positive) is “undermined” (a word with clearly negative connotations) by vindictiveness (surely a negative desire to harm or spite); but no, this narrator metafictionally comments on her own author's choices by inverting the ethical and emotional positions that we may expect to be in place. These startling words put us on notice to expect something odd in the ethical structure of what we are about to read.

Then, in the Afterword, we find that the author, “Duncker,” doesn't fully share her narrator's views of Eliot. The fallibility of the narrator was a pillar of Eliot's realism. Here, however, it is the author that, after the end of the narrative—that is, left with the privilege of the last word on the matter—effectively disavows her narrator (even if with the somewhat amused forbearance of the older person towards the younger one), thereby undermining the moral and factual reliability of everything we've just read. The author describes the narrator as “a sceptical young woman ... very firmly based in the present day . . . the second decade of the twenty-first century.” The emphasis on the context of the time is surely important: it leads us to relate the narrator's attitude to the age of social media, of the democratization of communication but also of often offensive comments made under the cloak of anonymity, of increased radicalization of positions, of even refusing to share a platform with those with whom one disagrees (the practice of “no platforming”), of accusing of hypocrisy those who do not constantly live up to their principles. So, as the young narrator condemns Eliot (and, incidentally, also utterly condemns, within the narrative, John Fowles's 1967 post-modern take on the Victorian age in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), it seems that it is she, rather than the author, that has “scores to settle” with “Mrs Lewes,” with what appears as a sense of vindictiveness accompanied by little love. Yet of course it is the author that has created this inflexible, prejudiced narrator.

So we have a historical, nineteenth-century subject, George Eliot, who was thematically concerned with moral choices and is known for her sympathetic realism, and who is narrated and condemned by a contemporary unsympathetic and rather unreliable narrator (who also starkly condemns Fowles), who is in turn created and, at the same time, more or less explicitly disavowed by her author, who may herself be more sympathetic to the historical subject Eliot, but who treats her own narrator in a way to an extent similar to how the narrator treats Eliot. If the

accumulation of “who” in the previous sentence becomes a little confusing (the first two refer to Eliot, then two refer to the narrator, and the last two refer to the author), that’s because of the text’s playfulness, its dizzying distorted reflections, its blatant exhibiting of metafictionality that may make the novel seem like a belated post-modernist game. Yet Duncker—academic and author of fictions that also engage with literary theory—is too canny for that, for being an author come late to the postmodernism party, or still hanging on at the party when everyone else has left. The novel uses the trickery of postmodernism—including pastiche: the novel is studded with (unattributed) quotations from other, mainly nineteenth-century, literature—to denounce the political and ethical limits of postmodernism (especially in the person of Fowles within the fiction, and in the way the narrator is treated in the “paratext” around the narrative). It uses a fiction about a historical character known for her sympathetic ethical moral stance in order to explore and question the (in)compatibility of different ethical horizons (the Victorian, the postmodern, that of the twenty-first century), highlighting in the process the impossibility for any ethical stance to remain unaffected when literature meets reality—as it does, programmatically, in the literary form of biofiction; and as it does in the Epigraphs and Afterword, that is, in the paratext that mediates between world and novel.¹

The second case I discuss, Gavin McCrea’s *Mrs Engels*, was also published in 2015 but it is very different from Duncker’s novel. It is narrated by the semi-literate Lizzie Burns, sister of Friedrich (or Frederick, as he is here called) Engels’s lover Mary Burns; after Mary’s death, Lizzie herself became his lover and finally wife. The narrative is full of quotations from, paraphrases of, and allusions to Friedrich Engels’s and Karl Marx’s writings and to the writings of their families and associates. For example, in the novel, Marx’s daughter Eleanor introduces Lizzie to a party of friends as “An Irishwoman and a true proletarian” (59), echoing a letter of 1878 by Engels in which he described Lizzie, after her death, as having been “of genuine Irish proletarian stock” (Kapp 114). A little later, Lizzie recalls Mary telling her about showing Engels around the slums of Manchester, an experience that, as most historians agree, Engels could not have undertaken on his own (he would undoubtedly have been robbed), and which provided the basis for his work *The Condition of the Working Class in England*:

“What do you do when you go out with him?”

“I show him around.”

1 I discuss Duncker’s *Sophie and the Sybil* at more length, in relation to Alicia Giménez Bartlett’s *Una habitación ajena*, in “Biographical Fiction’s Challenge to Realism.”

“Around where? What’s there to be shown?”

“He wants to see where we live.”

“We? We who?”

“We the Irish. We the workers.” (47-48)

The novel opens with Lizzie travelling on the train to London with Engels as they are moving from Manchester to a grand house on Primrose Hill. She is reflecting on the fact that for a working-class woman “Love is a bygone idea; centuries worn” (4), and that bread and heat are more important: a poor woman has to settle for what can give her economic security and keep her alive. Lizzie’s thoughts linking family to economic conditions may put the reader in mind of Engels’s work on *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which attributes women’s servitude to the evolution of property- and inheritance-based social systems, culminating in the bourgeois social organisation, which erode women’s rights. Throughout the novel, statements abound on the need to “educate” workers about class consciousness, even though these statements are accompanied by scepticism on the workers’ ability to fully grasp the concept. Marx says, for example: “we must get them educated” (214); “we mustn’t presume a high level of self-consciousness or theory in these men” (215), alluding to the historical Karl Marx’s famous words, in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented” (Marx 347). These much repeated (and at times distorted) words are of interest here because their echo brings directly into the novel the question at the heart of biofiction and heterobiography: the representation of the other that may be necessary when others cannot speak for themselves, but which carries the attendant risks of appropriating the voice and perspective of those others, erasing their autonomy. Significantly, in McCrea’s novel, the “true proletarian” Lizzie retorts, but “Oughtn’t we be hearkening to what they themselves have to say? . . . They being the revolutionaries?” (215).

The novel thus highlights the role that the largely forgotten and barely literate Mary and Lizzie Burns had in the development of one of the most influential political theories of the nineteenth century, as the narrative seeks to recover those erased female voices. However, other ethical dilemmas can be found at the centre of the text. After the fall of the Commune, when many French refugees have escaped to London, one of the French wounded fighters by the name of Bouton seems intent on picking a fight with Frederick Engels during a gathering at their house: Engels’s money, wealth, his going foxhunting with rich people and aristocrats, all lead to accusations of hypocrisy (140-147). The injured Bouton’s real target however,

Lizzie soon realizes, is Marx, who promotes armed revolution but does not himself participate in the fighting: he is the intellectual that theorizes the revolution without risk to his own person, for whom the lives of others are expendable in the name of the Cause. Bouton is chided by other refugees for his lack of courtesy and respect to their host, but we may also consider another angle: he is himself here in the Engels' home, drinking their wine, eating their food, socializing with them—arguably, a similar form of hypocrisy to the accusation he levels against Engels. Two complementary questions arise: must the philosopher always put his ideas into action himself for his ideas to be credible—must the philosopher be free from fault for his theories to be valid? Conversely, if Bouton has no right to question them, is there no position from which criticism can be made other than one of absolute purity?

Two other episodes point to dilemmas that are central to the ethical value of the encounter between the personal and the political. The first is Frederick's refusal to marry Lizzie when, after Mary's death and the start of their public relationship, she says explicitly that she wants to be married, and he responds that he cannot make that promise, because "I have to live according to my convictions" (252) and can only offer a spoken vow. However, years later, when she is on her deathbed, he finally marries her—it's his desire too, he tells her, but she knows that "his actions come not from his own desires, but from a wish to give me something; a gift that will please my God and ensure me a good death" (343). The second concerns the illegitimate son of the Marxes' governess Helen (or Nim, as she is known); Engels acknowledged paternity, but towards the end of the novel Lizzie discovers that the father was actually Marx, and Engels had declared paternity to protect his friend from scandal (not all historians agree on this version of the facts, but this is how the book presents the matter). Lizzie, who had never quite liked Marx's wife Jenny, now feels greater sympathy for her. She understands that ethical choices and judgements are always made in the dark, not in possession of the full facts, and can thus lead to the wrong decisions; or, to put it slightly differently: moral judgements are given on the basis of principles we believe to be correct, but because we are always at least partially in the dark, the moral choice may turn out to be the wrong one ethically—"how often we admire the wrong thing" (316), she reflects.

"And what about Frederick himself?" Lizzie wonders, "How ought he to be judged?" (316). By putting Karl and the cause "before everything—by being more loyal to *him* than to his own woman, his own name, his own *life*—he has made of Karl something like a wife" (316, emphases in the original). Engels has sacrificed his name in the name of the cause, and his principles for the benefit of Lizzie's and

Karl's. Lizzie's words can be read as condemnation of his choices, but they may also be seen as recognizing a kind of heroic generosity, in that Engels's actions admit the sacrifice of his own coherence for individual others (his friend Marx, his lover Lizzie) and collective others (the proletariat, those who cannot represent themselves).

The novel thus pitches the question of moral judgement within the clash between individual claims and political collective claims—or, one could say, to use Lyotard's terminology, between the small narrative of private truth and the grand narrative of historical social emancipation. It is the novel itself that encourages us to interpret this in such Lyotardian postmodern terms. At the very end, Lizzie thinks, in postmodern, post-Nietzschean way, "The truth is, there's naught but what you have in your mind about them. In front of us aren't our husbands but the stories we make of them, one story good till a better one comes to replace it" (344).

Lizzie Burns's story and voice can therefore be seen as a recovery of unheard, silenced voices or of alternative points of view on history, typical of a postmodern ethos; or—especially if we bear in mind the principle that we must represent, not only narratively but also politically, those that cannot represent themselves—as inviting us to re-think, after the critique of grand narratives in the last decades of the twentieth century, how historical grand narratives can still retain collective political and ethical value. The uneasy fit between personal desire and public, political commitment that we witness in the narrated lives of Lizzie, Engels and Marx can then be seen within this larger framework. However, it also raises another question about the potential violence of the demand for ethical coherence. As mentioned above, after refusing to marry Lizzie because this would have been against his convictions, Engels does so when she is close to the end, to allow her a good death: individual choices may not always be coherent with one's principles and life story, but do not for that cease to be ethical. In fact, it is possible that asking for complete coherence may itself be unethical, even violent. Judith Butler's words on autobiographical narratives express this point clearly and succinctly (and are, incidentally, also appropriate for the narrator of *Sophie and the Sibyl*): to demand "that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same" implies "a certain ethical violence":

It may even be that to hold a person accountable for his or her life in narrative form is to require a falsification of that life in the name of a certain conception of ethics. Indeed, if we require that someone be able to tell in story form the reasons why his or her life has taken the path it has, that is, to be a coherent

autobiographer, it may be that we prefer the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person. (Butler 34)

If narrative is employed in order to give shape and meaning to the continuum of the discrete facts of life and history,¹ the very form of biofiction or heterobiography (just like autobiography in Butler's analysis) may itself, in its search for *narrative* coherence, perform—or at least risks performing—an act of ethical violence on the represented subject, on which it seeks to impose a *personal* coherence, and from which it seeks self-explanation (an explanation of the self's life trajectory).

The third novel I now turn to, Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, originally published in 2003, is narrated in the voice of the semi-literate Binh, based on Trac and Nguyen, the historically real Vietnamese cooks of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris. Within the novel, *The Book of Salt* is the title of a manuscript written by Gertrude Stein. Binh is asked by his lover Marcus Lattimore, who borrows the cook from the Stein-Toklas household on Sundays, to “borrow” one of Stein's manuscripts, promising to return it the following week. Binh does so reluctantly as he knows this is a breach of the trust of his employers, but picks, in the cupboard where Toklas keeps Stein's manuscripts, one that, we later discover, is called *The Book of Salt*. As Binh looks at it, he recognizes that his name is all over the pages; he can't read English, so doesn't understand what the text says, but he knows it is about him. He is upset by this appropriation of his story, to which he did not give his consent: “I did not give you my permission, Madame, . . . My story, Madame, is mine” (215). Binh hands over the manuscript to Lattimore, expecting it to be returned the following week so that he can replace it in the cupboard, leaving his Mesdames none the wiser about the temporary subtraction. However, the following Sunday the lover has disappeared and the manuscript has been stolen; only a note is left, in which Lattimore reveals the title, *The Book of Salt*, and cruelly thanks Binh for it (238). There are various layers to Lattimore's deceit: he pretends he needs a cook on Sundays to entertain guests; then it turns out he wants sex with Binh; and then it turns out that he was in fact exploiting Binh and his desire, in order to get to the precious manuscripts.

This book that we read, called *The Book of Salt* and “written by” Binh, may therefore be seen as the cook's re-appropriation of his story, which Stein had stolen (unless we read it as the manuscript written by Stein in the first person of Binh, a grammatical sleight of hand to which Stein was certainly no stranger, as we know from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*; however, the novel doesn't seem to

1 See for example Eakin, Freeman, and White.

support such suggestion). Once again, the issues at the centre of the novel and the genre would be about who has the right to write and own someone's story, voice, desires, memories. But, of course, Binh only discovers that Stein has stolen his story because *he* has stolen her manuscript for a lover, who then steals it from him, in a chain of thefts.

Referring to his sexual encounters with other men, Binh says that “real names are never exchanged” (243). Towards the end of the novel, we discover that Binh is not his real name. “I never meant to deceive,” he says (243), and yet by not giving us his real name, Binh involves us readers, too, in a transaction which, like the sexual transactions to which the cover of false names applies, is an exchange of pleasure but not of trust.

So: we may query the role of the privileged American author Gertrude Stein who, within the novel, takes the story of her “Indochinese” servant without his permission (or even the role of Truong, who writes this novel), but what is the role of us readers, put in the position of willing receivers of stolen goods? Why do we read this story, of this cook? Isn't it, as it is also in Lizzie's case, because we recognize other more illustrious historical names—Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx? Even if the purpose of the texts appears to be the restitution of voice, aren't we in fact reiterating the secondariness of these individuals through the telling and reading of these stories that attract their writers and their readers—us—not because of their rather obscure subjects but because of their famous ones? Aren't we readers drawn into the hypocrisy of the transaction too, seeking to extract pleasure out of individuals who, in the end, remain historically anonymous?

Thus the novels, while giving voice to historically forgotten subjects, also cast light on the ethical pitfalls of the genre to which they belong. Which is not of course to say that these novels should not be written (or that they are immoral texts), but to draw attention, once again, to the ethical conundrums that force us, as readers, to accept our own failings in matters of coherence.

The fourth novel I want to consider is Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover*, published in 1992. It centres on Sir William Hamilton, British Ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth; his lover then wife Emma; her lover Horatio Nelson. The novel opens with the narrator at a flea market, looking for something to pick, to “rescue,” even if it may be “rubbish”:

It is the entrance to a flea market. ... Why enter? What do you expect to see? I'm seeing. I'm checking on what's in the world. What's left. What's discarded.

What's no longer cherished. What had to be sacrificed. What someone thought might interest someone else. But it's rubbish. If there, here, it's already been sifted through. But there may be something valuable, there. Not valuable, exactly. But something *I* would want. Want to rescue. Something that speaks to me. To my longings. Speaks to, speaks of. Ah ... (3; the last ellipsis is in the text)

The narrator has found something: her character, her story. Does this interest in collecting kitsch make the author better able to represent Hamilton, an internationally renowned collector? But are her subjects therefore collected characters of dubious value, like objects in a flea market, recycled, re-sold, tatty, rubbish, and yet somewhat exotic, attractive *because* old and useless? And is the profession of the writer that of rescuing from oblivion, or of taking something and passing it on as something different, "interesting"? Or is it—like much of the collecting done by figures like Hamilton, Elgin, and of course Marcus Lattimore in *The Book of Salt*—a form of plundering, of exploitation, of swindling? Is it what biofiction does, in rescuing discarded, forgotten characters and stories? (It is also worth noting that the other major character in the novel, Hamilton's second wife Emma, was a famous and successful impersonator of legendary, historical, literary females, which she embodied in her poses, known as "attitudes").

Again, I must limit myself to a much shorter discussion than this long novel would require, and skip directly to the end. In the last section of the book, which Sontag calls the "choleric" section, the narrator cedes the narrative to four women, "angry women, speaking [in the first person] from beyond the grave," as she describes them in an interview in the *Paris Review* (Sontag, "Art of Fiction"). The four women are Hamilton's first wife Catherine, his second wife Emma, Emma's mother, and finally the one I will focus on here: Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel, a minor character in the story but very interesting historical figure in her own right. A well-educated Portuguese noblewoman born in Rome who wrote poetry and frequented the literary circles of the time, she was one of the revolutionaries who, inspired by the French Revolution, overthrew the Bourbons to establish the short-lived Neapolitan Republic in 1799. She directed the Republic's newspaper, writing most of its articles on all sorts of subjects, wrote economic treatises, proposed the establishment of a national bank, and was executed after the failure of the revolution and the restoration of the Bourbons to the throne. It was Nelson himself who signed the sentence of death: as Eleonora had renounced her noble title and was a foreigner, she was not entitled to the guillotine and was hanged, a more humiliating form of execution.

This final yielding of the stage, as it were, to such a strong historical female character that fought for justice, who, maltreated by her husband, had miscarried twice and lost her only child, and unusually for women at the time had sought legal separation, seems to echo another story, narrated in another novel. Anna Banti's *Artemisia* (1947) is based on the early-modern female painter Artemisia Gentileschi, who had been raped by a painter to whom she'd been apprenticed by her father, but who then refused to marry her; very unusually for the time, she took him to court, where she even had to undergo torture to demonstrate she, rather than he, was telling the truth. At the start of the novel, the narrator, a close projection of Banti herself, is sobbing in her nightshirt, having lost everything, including her manuscript of the life of Artemisia, when her house in Florence, close to a bridge, was blown up in 1944 by German bombs in the attempt to delay the advance of the Allied forces. Suddenly, she hears the voice of the young Artemisia bidding her, "Don't cry" (23). This presence comforts her, they begin a conversation, the narrator frequently writing in Artemisia's first person, their voices often merging, sharing their sense of trauma—or, one may say (and Banti's narrator does eventually say so), the narrator appropriating the suffering of the seventeenth-century painter in order to assuage her own. I'll return soon to the dialogue across the centuries between the two voices of narrator and character. At this point I want to note the similarity between Artemisia and Eleonora: two strong women who pursued their own careers, had to fight with the men in their lives who abused them, neither of them conforming to the expected role for female subjects.

In the interview given to Edward Hirsch in *The Paris Review*, a few years after the publication of *The Volcano Lover*, Sontag says: "I always knew the book would end with women's voices, the voices of some of the women characters in the book, who would finally have their say." Hirsch asks whether her ending allowed her to "give the woman's point of view," but Sontag disagrees with the assumption "that there is a woman's, or a female, point of view," and adds that "whatever their numbers, women are always regarded, are culturally constructed, as a minority. It's to minorities that we impute having a unitary point of view." Eleonora's narrative, Sontag comments, provides an "ethical wide shot" that shows us that Nelson, Hamilton, Emma "should be judged as harshly as she [Eleonora] judges them." And she adds: "The last word should be given to someone who speaks for victims." Not to a victim, or as victim, though Eleonora is also one at the end, but *someone who speaks for them*. These words seem, as it were, to complete the suspended sentence that we read at the start of the novel, when the narrator visits the flea market: "there may be something valuable, there. . . . Something that speaks to me. To my

longings. Speaks to, speaks of” (3)—or: *speaks for*.

But that “speaks for victims,” in the interview, about Eleonora, also causes a double take, with its suggestion that victims, constructed as minority, can speak with a single unitary voice. How can one reject the essentializing of the minority (women, who are not in fact a minority) as having a unitary point of view *and at the same time* regard the final monologue of Eleonora as speaking “for the victims”? (For *all* of them? Surely “victims” can’t be thus essentialized as a unitary category?) Who exactly can Sontag—or her narrator—impersonating Eleonora, *speak for*?

Yet, in yielding the stage for the final scene to such a strong historical female character, a revolutionary who fought for justice for those less privileged than she—or to put it differently: in the narrative choice to speak for the one who speaks for the victims—the novel establishes a kind of chain of connection and inheritance, as if each generation had to carry on the battles of the former ones, each voice subsumed into the later one, and yet recovered against a history that continues to seek to erase it again. At the conclusion of her narrative and of the book, Eleonora, reader of Mary Wollestonecraft and radical who wants to redress injustice for the poor and the oppressed, writes:

Sometimes I had to forget that I was a woman to accomplish the best of which I was capable. Or I would lie to myself about how complicated it is to be a woman. Thus do all women, including the author of this book. (417)

I am not aware whether Sontag had read *Artemisia* yet in 1992, when she completed *The Volcano Lover*, thought she had certainly read it a decade or so later, when she wrote the introduction to a new edition of the English translation, published in 2004 (the Introduction itself appeared as an article in the *London Review of Books* in 2003, under the title “A Double Destiny”). Eleonora’s words finally addressing Sontag—“including the author of this book”—seem again an echo of *Artemisia*. Towards the end of Banti’s novel, a relationship is established between several of the novel’s female characters and their lives: Artemisia herself, the strong artist that defeats gender convention and takes her rapist to court; the younger, very promising Neapolitan painter Annella de Rosa, victim of her husband’s violence, abused by him and finally killed by him, whose presence imposes itself in Artemisia’s memory when, later in her life, in London, she paints her own self-portrait with the features of Annella:

Whether it is a self-portrait or not, a woman who paints in sixteen hundred and

forty is very courageous, and this counts for Annella and for at least a hundred others, right up to the present. “It counts for you too,” she concludes. (232)

By this point, close to the end of the novel, the narration has been continuously in the third person for quite some time, as the narrator had stepped back, about half-way through the text, from the identification with the earlier woman and from the appropriation of her suffering to assuage her own, declaring it a presumptuous mistake (138). Now Artemisia speaks in the first person one last time, with words directed to the novelist, including her in that chain of connections and inheritance: “It counts for you too,” very much like Eleonora’s “including the author of this book.”¹

There is, in the distancing and connection across time, across spaces, across social positions, an ethical recognition of the other’s integrity, and a dialogic response to that integrity. This is, in the words of the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, “an altruistic ethics of relation” which however should not support identification, even empathy, but should recognize—as Banti does, half way through her novel—the “uniqueness and distinction” (Cavarero 92) of the other: “No matter how much you are similar and consonant, says this ethic, your story is never my story. No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognize myself *in* you and, even less, in the collective *we*” (92). Cavarero acknowledges the impossibility, the unethical nature of the appropriation of another’s story. However, she does not assume anyone’s exclusive right over their story; indeed, we need others to reveal our stories to us. “Tell me my story” is the request at the origin of all autobiography: how can I otherwise know the story of my own birth?

We can now circle back to Eleonora’s words which I started quoting earlier, and which conclude the novel:

Sometimes I had to forget that I was a woman to accomplish the best of which I was capable. Or I would lie to myself about how complicated it is to be a woman. Thus do all women, including the author of this book. But I cannot forgive those who did not care about more than their own glory or well-being. They thought they were civilized. They were despicable. Damn them all. (417)

Strong words indeed: uncompromising, not admitting to any possibility of

1 I have discussed Anna Banti’s *Artemisia*, its references to other women writers (in particular, Virginia Woolf) and artists, and the ethical issues raised by the novel’s use of first- and third-person narrative in “Anna Banti and Virginia Woolf” and in *Autobiographies of Others* 154-165.

redemption or of forgiveness for those who did not care or forgive.

We must be on our guard: these chains of female transmission and inheritance may risk essentializing women as the only ones who can speak about and for women. But there is also the recognition that no individual lives independently of other individuals, that our lives are always shaped by the struggles of others, and in turn shape those of others; that caring for the other (not being despicable; pursuing sympathy and solidarity) requires imagining oneself as another, no matter how different the other is, across time, ethnicity, class; that the link of sympathy and solidarity also transforms and others us; that we must recognize this risk of erasing the other's separate identity, and resist that risk; and that such an act of imagination, therefore, is not always—need not always be: we should attend to the necessity that it does not become—unethical appropriation.

The novels discussed above are just some examples of how biofictional and heterobiographical texts differently inflect the various ethical conundrums that concern the form itself, the individual novels, the authors and their intentionality, the narrator and the narrative choices, the characters' behaviour and that of the historical individuals the characters reflect, and the readers' own role. The novels show how these ethical questions are saturated with inescapable complexities and contradictions—sometimes resolving into accusations of hypocrisy (mismatch between principle and action), sometimes into what we could call a necessary acceptance, even embracing, of (the risk of) hypocrisy; sometimes requiring us to walk a difficult tightrope between our appropriation and recognition of the other as other; sometimes accepting the singularity of the individual and at others the legitimacy of their being subsumed into collective identities; in all cases, holding these ethical issues firmly at their centre. To conclude, I will note a final point about these texts, located at the encounter of historicity and fictional literary representation: in their contending with these ethical matters, explicitly within their thematic content or more implicitly with their formal structures, the biofictional or heterobiographical form is crucial. Ethical questions can of course be raised in fictions that invent their characters rather than finding them in history; however, it is the historicity of these individuals—the fact that they are not (or not just) characters and situations constructed ad hoc to explore a theoretical question, but are presented as, and recognized by readers as, real human beings who had real voices and stories—that gives these novels and this literary form their peculiar ethical force.

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