Critical Commentary

A critical investigation into truth, gender and ethics in non-fiction narrative writing.

Introduction: the messy business of truth, lies, myth and story.

Inside the Mask is a work in the autobiographical mode which explores the ambiguous terrain between fact, fiction, truth and lies, past and present. The material used included the documentation and archive of seventy-six years of Bensley's chaotic existence; an account of eighteen months of turmoil in my own life; personal memories stretching over fifty years; and four psychogeographical research trips. Within the work, genres collide and shift: blending autobiography, biography, fiction and psychogeography. This resulting work of creative nonfiction is my original contribution to current literary discourse on genre-boundaries, writing the self, and the permeable, and often contested, boundaries of fact and fiction, truth and lies, and past and present in autobiographical forms. In this critical commentary I contextualise *Inside the Mask* within a long historical tradition of women writing about their lives through unorthodox autobiographical forms. I position my practice in relation to this tradition.

Throughout, I interrogate how the critical, factual and creative research influenced the final iteration of this story and how I, as a female writer burdened by gendered responsibilities and living through Covid restrictions, found ways in which to voice not only my situation but the lives of Bensley's wives. In this introduction, I examine my personal reasons for wishing the explore this topic. I discuss the creative work's origin story and the impact that had on the final draft, including decisions about genre, mythic archetypes, and the placement of my central character.

My brother was born in 1966 with a mangled spine and swollen head. Had he been born months earlier he wouldn't have lived. But, in 1965, a brand-new technology had been patented. It was a hydrocephalus shunt pump, which allowed the fluid in his head to be drained

and his life saved. He lived for another thirty-three years. Often in pain. His list of disabilities was as follows: spina bifida, hydrocephalus, deafness (caused by high doses of drugs), brain damage, autism (diagnosed much later) and, what killed him, kidney failure. His shunt would often get blocked which resulted in emergency life-saving operations, scarring his body; he suffered from bed sores—one so deep it exposed his hip bone; he was prone to bladder and kidney infections, making a stoma and urine bag necessary. His bowels had to be evacuated manually. Yet despite all of this, he was fun and a terror. He'd run away, either in his wheelchair or shuffling on his bottom, just for the fun of it. He'd empty his urine bag over his bed for a giggle or chuck his food about and roar with laughter at our faces.

Born three-and-a-half years later, this was my normal. Hospital visits and chaos. My parents, wanting to spare me from the idea of death, tried to shield me from the knowledge that his regular emergency operations were touch and go. Yet on those wards I saw terrible things: babies with swollen heads like aliens; children, the same age as me, yellow and stick-thin; non-verbal teenagers weeping in pain. None of this was spoken of at home. In our house, the mantra was that we were lucky and happy. I couldn't speak of pain or fear because my feelings were nothing compared to what my brother and parents were going through. To speak of any unhappiness would disrupt the facade of a happy stable family coping in crisis.

In earlier iterations of *Inside the Mask,* I wrote about my brother only fleetingly. For example, on page 201, I reference having pushed my brother in a wheelchair for many years. Only once did I write about my brother in terms of grief, 'Did [Kate] feel as I did when my brother died? How I felt after my first birth? As I do now my son has left? // Lost.'[1] The quote which comes closest to the anxiety I felt as a child is:

[1] Petra McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, n.d., 92.

> I have the scratchy feeling of waiting, as though I'm expecting something terrible to rear its head. As a child, my brother was often rushed to hospital for life-saving procedures. As an adult, X and my eldest son provided instability and drama. The years of waiting for disaster should be over.[2]

In later versions, I wrote about this experience more fully, using it as an opportunity for the narrator to enquire why she had been able to live with the unrest her eldest son created. This came as a late insertion due to a belated realisation that my childhood experiences fuelled *Inside the Mask* and were the underlying reason for my creative and critical research into ambiguous terrain between fact, fiction, truth and lies in autobiographical writing. There was always the family story—that of happiness, security, and joy found in whimsy—covering pain, chaos and death. Unable to express my terror, or even given the tools to recognise it, the truth was hidden, even to myself. An early and eager reader, I escaped into stories written by others, yet my personal truth was always there, bubbling under the surface. In the final version of the book, I decided to include this aspect of my life more explicitly within Chapter Four, beginning with this thought, 'I wonder why I have let [my son's behaviour] go on for so long but then I remember that living like this, in various levels of chaos, is familiar to me.'[3]

During the writing and research of this thesis, I came to understand that the deep significance of Harry Bensley in my life related to how imposed narratives are often internalised: leading to cognitive dissonance. This is particularly true when there is an unequal power balance—the storyteller, by force of gender, social, familial, racial and other dynamics, has a higher status than the person they are imposing the story on. In these cases, it is more difficult for the recipient of the story to firstly recognise that the story is not true, preventing internalisation, and/or fight back against the story to speak their truth.

[2] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 90.
[3] Petra McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 49.

I first fell in love with the original tale of a man walking around the world in around 2011, enjoying the quirky adventurous nature of the story. I had not yet suspected the lies behind it, nor the power dynamics in which it was born. In *Inside the Mask,* I say that Bensley's story was told to me by a local raconteur. In fact, this was Martin Newell, a singer-songwriter most famous for his low-fi pop music recorded on cassettes. A 2019 documentary, *Upstairs Planet: Cleaners from Venus & The Universe of Martin Newell,* describes Newell's process and how 'the world leaks into the recordings.'[4] In *Inside the Mask,* the world at first leaks into the story, then stains it, and ultimately threatens to drown it. Both during research and in the act of writing, there was, for me personally, a continual battle between intrusions of the 'real world' and the process of the 'creative act', sometimes one overwhelming the other. Thus, when my husband was admitted to hospital, events in the real world were so pressing and critical that they silenced my imagination.[5] Yet, because imagination was one of my only forms of escape, it refused to die even in the most difficult circumstances and soon resurfaced. Because I could not ignore the real world, I created the character of Lily as muse and mentor and placed her within my real-life family setting.

Although I ultimately decided to omit Martin Newell's name from my final manuscript (wanting to concentrate on the effect of the Bensley story in the first chapter), he was for the reasons described above, a fitting narrator. Also, as Martin himself will admit, he, like Bensley, is an 'eccentric'. Only lately diagnosed with autism, he (like Bensley again) is at heart, a showman who, in public settings with strangers, finds himself most comfortable as the centre of attention. He delivers with authority and can, at times, have a sharp tongue with those he believes dismiss his worth. Thus, when I first heard of Bensley it was in the position of a shy (female) listener unwilling to challenge Martin's (male) authority in case he turned on me.

[4] Graham Bendel. 'The World Leaks In - Upstairs Planet: Cleaners from Venus & The Universe of Martin Newell', 2019, Independent Production, 71 minutes.
[5] McQueen, *Inside the Mask,* 152-157.

Not that I would have questioned the story. After all, the tale Martin told was one that had been passed down from generation to generation for over a hundred years, with only a few embellishments. Bensley's false narrative was a culmination of what American philosopher Richard Rorty defines as an 'unforced agreement' among large numbers of people concerning stories in which reality is purportedly described.[6] The weight of this consensual acceptance of the story, through generations, means that the most unlikely stories become to be viewed as fact. As the Bensley story was not beyond the realms of possibility and had been told to me by Martin, who was versed in the local history of Wivenhoe, I, with my history of having been fed alternative narratives from an early age, fully believed it. This belief was compounded by information gleaned from Wikipedia[7] which verified Martin's story in most of its content.

Rorty writes, 'some metaphors are "successful", in the sense that we find them so compelling that we try to make them candidates for belief, for literal truth.'[8] On some level, even within the first hearing, I saw Bensley's story as both true and a metaphor. In fact, this was the first indication of the multiplicity of the Bensley narrative in which the 'world' and the 'story' competed for primacy. It was true, I believed, that he had walked for a wager wearing an iron mask and pushing a pram. However, because Bensley chose a knight's helmet for his iron mask, and because the quest involved meeting a wife sight unseen, the story also echoed medieval chivalric romances, such as 'Gawain and the Green Knight.'[9] In this tale, Gawain, a knight of King Arthur's Round Table, accepts a challenge from a mysterious 'green knight' and fights off the advances of a woman whose 'body and bearing was beyond praise.'[10] Bensley too had women falling at his feet according to my original website research: '200 or so marriage

[6] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19.
[7] For the version I originally read, see Wikipedia, 'Harry Bensley', modified 3 October 2011, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Harry_Bensley&direction=next&oldid=420736844.
[8] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 54.
[9] Anon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Marie Borroff (London: Longmans, 1967).
[10] Anon, *Sir Gawain*, 20.

proposals from women who'd never seen his face.'[11] Gawain's adventure tested his loyalty to the King; Bensley made play of his patriotism in proving to an American that an Englishman could walk around the world anonymously. Alongside its echoes of Medieval Romance Literature, Bensley's story was analogous with, and perhaps inspired by, late Victorian and Edwardian adventure writing (which I had read as a child—the books of Jules Verne being among my favourites). According to Richard Phillips in his book *Mapping Men and Empire: Geographies of Adventure*, Edwardian adventure writing typically consists of a lone man going on a quest (ultimately to foreign climes) and through his perseverance, ingenuity, and strength has the ability to fulfil his quest.[12]

Joseph Campbell, whose work centred on comparative mythology and religion, theorised, in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that all myths and stories from around the world can be condensed into a monomyth in which:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.[13]

Bensley's original story certainly fitted this description: by tramping the streets of England dressed as a knight, Bensley moves away from the world of his 'common day' landed gentry lifestyle into a realm of 'supernatural wonder' where a man in an iron mask is treated with kindness by mayors, alderman and even kings;[14] where a woman can fall in love and marry

[11] 'Dark Roasted Blend: The Man In The Iron Mask', *Dark Roasted Blend* (blog), accessed 15 April 2020, http://www.darkroastedblend.com/2010/06/man-in-iron-mask.html.
[12] Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure* (London and New York: Psychology Press, 1997), 8.
[13] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Fontana, 1993), xx.
[14] Bensley was said to have sold King Edward a postcard in the 3 October 2011 version Wikipedia entry. Wikipedia, 'Harry Bensley'.

sight unseen. Our hero does not come back from his 'mysterious adventure' with a 'decisive victory' in terms of the bet paid out, but he wins something even more important: he wins the love of a woman. He also keeps his pride as he only gives up his journey to fight for his country. Furthermore, it can be argued that Bensley's fabulous character did 'bestow boons', not only through his patriotism but through becoming a symbol of freedom. Therefore, in my original idea for a historical/biographical text, I wished to explore Campbell's monomyth within the framework of Medieval Romance Literature and Edwardian Adventure tropes. In terms of what Rorty terms a 'successful' metaphor, I wished to utilise Bensley as a 'shadowy entity that spoke to a longing for freedom and anonymity.'[15]

Eleven years after I heard the oral history about Bensley's walk, I discovered a local history book by Steve Holland,[16] *Iron Mask. The Story of Harry Bensley's 'Walking around the World' Hoax*.[17] Containing genealogical research on Bensley, it proved that most of the oral story I'd heard was based on a fraud. Bensley did walk in an iron mask for eleven months but there never was a wager and he never was a landed gentleman with means. He walked to provide himself with an income: selling pamphlets, postcards, and appearing in music halls. He had just been released from jail where he'd been imprisoned for fraud and bigamy. During his life, Bensley abandoned (at least) three women and four children. This story came to me as a shock. Where was my knight, my romantic, patriotic knave? Yet, with my background of truth competing with someone else's narrative, I found the new story compelling.

Despite discovering that Bensley's 'walk' was built on lies, and that he had wreaked havoc in the lives of those who'd trusted him, I did not want to lose the power the first narrative

[15] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 15.
[16] Steve Holland is a freelance author and editor, with a prolific back catalogue of over fifty books and one thousand five hundred articles. 'Steve Holland Books and Biography', *Waterstones*, accessed 23 October 2023, https://www.waterstones.com/author/steve-holland/26136. Most of these are non-fiction and are mainly about British comics and pulp paperbacks. *Iron Mask* was published through his own imprint *Bear Alley Books*.
[17] Steve Holland, *Iron Mask. The Story of Harry Bensley's 'Walking around the World' Hoax* (Wivenhoe: Bear Alley Books, 2019), 12.

had wrought in my imagination. In real life, Bensley did not walk around the world, but he did walk over 2,400 miles.[18] His adventure lasted eleven months, in which he managed to appear, according to my calculations, in at least one hundred and sixty British and international newspapers. It was, in fact, this real-life exertion which allowed his fraudulent persona and accompanying narrative to be believed by his contemporaries without question. Even when he himself had, at least partially, come clean in his December 1908 article to 'Answers' in *The Penny Pictorial*,[19] in which he confessed to being a felon without a fortune who already had a wife, the myth of him taking a wager remained in the popular imagination. It was robust enough to survive one hundred and ten years of retelling; it was sparse enough to allow added frills like J.P. Morgan and Russian investments (neither fact mentioned by Bensley at the time of his walk). Because the original story was so tenacious, I wanted to convey the power of it in what would become my new iteration of Bensley's story. By including the first time I heard the tale and the effect it had on me, I wanted the reader to experience the same shock that I'd had when discovering the original narrative was almost entirely untrue. Accordingly, included in the text as it now stands, is the memory of Martin Newell (the local raconteur) telling the Bensley tale on 'a wet November night' and my reaction as narrator, in order to underline the significance of the original Bensley story in practical and mythic terms. After the narrator has returned home after hearing the story, I write:

> Somehow, he had always been lurking in the shadows, waiting until his name was called. It was as though I had finally found an image to place all the feelings I couldn't express. Feelings I couldn't name - cannot still.[20]

[18] Tim Kirby, 'Harry Bensley's Masked Journey', Google My Maps, 19 August 2009. https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=19yRg4reVUlmRonYpEN40z3j3ly8&hl=en.
[19] Anon. (likely Bensley), 'The Great Masked Man Hoax', *Penny Pictorial*, 19 December 1908.
[20] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 15.

The image of Bensley as I had first imagined him—wearing a mask and pushing a pram—also appears as a motif throughout the narrative to impress upon the reader the powerful and enduring effect of the oral story. Both the facts and the fabricated tale exist simultaneously within the narrator's mind: both narratives experienced as emotionally true (just as dreams can bleed into one's waking life). Carole Angier writes about W.G. Sebald's world that, 'past and present are interchangeable, and things can be sensed in both.'[21] I too wanted to express the permeability of past, present, fiction and fact, and how the mythic is present in the prosaic and vice versa. This, I attempt to express as I re-enact the first day of Bensley's walk, scribbling in my notebook:

> *Ghosts gather—Harry and Kate moving house, Lily changing trains to go back to her parents, me on the trip to Norwood. Harry sits on a train in an iron mask to get to Charing Cross to start his journey. He's also in front of me, a crowd behind him as he walks down Bermondsey Street. Where's Mabel and what is she thinking? Do I care about her? I should.*[22]

Bensley's falsehood about his walk, therefore, became, in the final version, a demonstration of the tenacity of the things we want to believe be they true or not. Reality holds within it, and is affected by, myth, narrative, lies and waking dreams.

The false story was also interesting in terms of character delineation. That a man so obviously a fraudster could come up with a plan that tricked so many, was intriguing. He'd taken what skills he had—showmanship, marketing, publicity—and, thus, freed himself (if momentarily) from poverty. Bensley's true story, therefore, like his false narrative, could be framed within the parameters of Campbell's monomyth: a poor man uses his wit, embarks on a journey, and gains riches. The boons he brought to mankind included whimsy, myth, and

[21] Carole Angier, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2021), 172.
[22] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 213.

hope in his 'rags to riches' narrative. Holland's text, therefore, was an extremely useful starting point. To verify the facts in Holland's book, I extensively employed the *Findmypast* website which contained relevant censuses, voting registers, prison, war and workhouse records, and birth and death details. I used this information to order birth and death certificates from the General Records Office. I was also able to access the British Newspaper Archives from the site.

Critic and poet, Holly Pester, in surveying the practice of fanfiction archive research, writes that it 'has the potential to reveal the imperfect divisions between what is and is not part of research.'[23] In purely literal terms, the above research I undertook could be split into two: that which was factually true; and falsehoods which had their foundations in Bensley's narratives. Discounting dead ends (there was, for example, more than one Harry Bensley operating in the Edwardian era), both the 'true' research (that verified by records) and the 'not true' (that emanating from Bensley) played a part within my text. Thus, much of the 'not true' propagated by Bensley stayed but with explicit commentary demonstrating how they were lies made for monetary or egotistical gain. In earlier versions of *Inside the Mask,* the narrator knew everything about Bensley at the beginning having read Hall's book. However, to increase dramatic tension, it became important that this information was revealed piecemeal to the narrator. Thus, a fictional structuring was employed within the factual timeline of the book. Part of the narrative thrust became how the narrator could come to terms with finding out the truth about her hero. How would she react to the slow unravelling of the truth? When she finally discovers that the 'walk' itself was built on a fraud, it comes as something as an anti-climax. This 'theatrical performance' turned out to be one of the more honest and less hurtful thing

[23] Holly Pester, 'Archive Fanfiction: Experimental Archive Research Methodologies and Feminist Epistemological Tactics', *Feminist Review* 115, no. 1 (2017): 114-129, 117.

Bensley did. The narrator has to consider the shape of narrative—what she had once considered a climax is a subplot. Had the same been true in her own life, with other imposed narratives?

In terms of character, Pester's 'imperfect divisions', also worked as a catalyst to probe how Bensley was both progenitor of falsehoods and the character under investigation. Which lies had he chosen to tell and why? Some of these are easy to answer. He chose to tell people he was about to come into money to trick them into 'lending' him cash; he used a 'rich American' disbelieving that an English man would walk around the world anonymously to stimulate the public's patriotic support; he said he would find a wife sight unseen because romance sells. Over the course of his life, Bensley told many falsehoods but the one he returned to time and time again was that he was a landed gentleman. Part of this must have been to do with using the class system to gain people's trust but, one suspects, much of it has to do with Bensley's own delusions of grandeur. This tied into my theme of self-deception and the stories we tell ourselves.

As my archival research continued, it became less and less appealing to write a biography or historical fiction in which Bensley was the main character using Campbell's monomyth. At times, Bensley does heroic things such as give to charity, condemn other fraudsters, and insist on better pay for firemen but we suspect he is only doing these acts for self-gain. His death, in a bed-sit in Brighton, is a fitting end for someone who worshipped money and prestige. In my early decisions as to how his story could be told, I thought that Bensley could be written as an 'Anti-Hero'—that is, according to *A Dictionary of Media and Communications,* 'A central character in a narrative or drama who lacks the admirable qualities of fortitude, courage, honesty, and decency that are usually possessed by traditional heroes.'[24] However, Fiona Peters and Rebecca Stewart, in their book *Crime Uncovered: Antihero*, write

[24] 'Anti-Hero', in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, by Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday (Oxford University Press, 2020).

that the most effective antiheroes are those that, 'refuse to bow to the expectations of society and rebel against the rules that bind us all.'[25] Though it could be argued that Bensley, a working-class man, disrupted the class system by posing as one of the members of the ruling class, in fact Bensley had no intention of undermining the hierarchy. Indeed, his fantasy of being the son of Robert Burrell speaks of a desire not to disrupt the system but to join the oppressors. And, if he couldn't join them, he was happy to take money from people who believed in the myth of an honourable gentleman.

The pivotal moment I realised that I could not write Bensley as either hero or anti-hero using a traditional narrative arc was when I read Bensley's trial at the Old Bailey. Lily, Bensley's second wife, is called as a witness, and cries, 'I believed everything he told me.'[26] She turns to Bensley and addresses him, 'You told me you would commit suicide […] whenever any unpleasantness arose.'[27] Peters and Stewart claim that antiheroes, 'critique the notions of heroism by disturbing and disrupting our expectations, and furthermore by enticing us to be complicit in this.'[28] Because I identified with Bensley's wives and did not want to gloss over his treatment of them, I had no desire to be complicit and did not want to invite the reader's admiration for this liar and cheat. And, whether the readers saw him as hero or villain, if I employed Campbell's monomyth with its focus on a lone hero battling the odds, Bensley would be centre stage. I would also be aping Bensley's own fictional narrative of a knight errant hero battling against the odds: the kind of narrative that is borne from medieval and Edwardian adventure tropes.

In Sean McGlynn's paper on the concept of medieval masculinity he writes how:

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[25] Fiona Peters and Rebecca Stewart, *Crime Uncovered: Antihero* (Bristol, United Kingdom: Intellect Books Ltd, 2015), 7.
[26] I used Lily's line as my epigraph as it encapsulated lies versus truth and had within it the notion of self-deception. Lily desperately wanted to believe her lover despite evidence which must have made her suspect him.
[27] Old Bailey, 'Harry Bensley November 1904'. *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*. Accessed 19 September 2019. https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/record/t19041114-26
[28] Fiona Peters and Rebecca Stewart, *Crime Uncovered: Antihero* (Bristol, United Kingdom: Intellect Books Ltd, 2015), 7.

> medieval chivalry, despite the popular image of fair maidens in distress, served the needs of men rather than women. Chivalry was, first and foremost, a manifestation of a martial ethos; fashions, courtly love and purported consideration for women were very much secondary embellishments.[29]

This translates into the literature. In what Gerald Morgan calls, 'a misogynistic rant',[30] the eponymous narrator in *Gawain and the Green Knight* blames his fate on the women in the story saying that since Adam, men have been brought to grief and 'through the wiles of women be wooed into sorrow.'[31] Similarly, Richard Phillips proposes, that the genre of Edwardian adventure literature was 'committed to the continuous re-inscription of dominant ideologies of masculinity.'[32] Embedded in its narratives was the notion that stereotypical upper-class white male behaviour is not only advantageous but admirable. Isabel Santaularia, in her paper on Edwardian treasure hunting narratives argues that femininity is seen as 'meek, submissive and emotional.'[33] Furthermore, Elaine Showalter proposes this genre was not only an attempt to propagandise the British Empire (and its ideals of masculinity and class), but also was 'man's literary revolution intended to reclaim the kingdom of the English novel for male writers, male readers and male stories.'[34]

Both the misogyny of medieval literature and the Edwardian adventure trope of women being ignored or seen as weak is fully explored by Bensley's fabricated story. He left his first wives, Kate and Lily, out of both his fraudulent narrative and his confession and he also never

[29] Sean McGlynn, 'Pueri Sunt Pueri: Machismo, Chivalry, and the Aggressive Pastimes of the Medieval Male Youth.' *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 42, no. 1 (2016): 88–100, 8.
[30] Gerald Morgan, 'Medieval Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst against Women in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."' *The Modern Language Review* 97, no. 2 (2002): 265–78, 265.
[31] Anon, *Sir Gawain*, 50.
[32] Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire*, 5.
[33] M. Isabel Santaula `Ria I Capdevila, '"He Comes Back Badder and Bigger than Ever!" Readapting the Masculine and Negotiating the Feminine in Treasure-Hunting Adventure Fiction', *Journal of Gender Studies* 12, no. 3 (November 2003): 215–28, 216.
[34] Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), 79.

named Mabel Reed, his third wife. She was, at first, a hypothetical woman willing (or daft) enough to marry sight unseen and then, once found, Bensley anonymised her with a false name and an identity as a gentlewoman. As such, Mabel became a plot twist: a character to hang a joke off, 'I might have been a hooligan for all she knew,' he says, during one interview.[35] When he is arrested at Bexleyheath in January 1908, we see Bensley's attitude reflected in the wider society. As shown in Chapter 21 of *Inside the Mask*, much of the court case is taken up with jokes about his searching for a wife, as detailed in a contemporary report in the *Kentish Independent*.[36] The men of the past are not alone in using the women in this way. On the *Dark Roasted Blend* website, even after Holland's research, the stories of Bensley's wives are only added as quirky sidekicks to an eccentric character, with quips such as, 'Strangest way to receive tons of marriage offers,' and 'One Way to Get Popular with Ladies: Set out to Walk Around the World in an Iron Mask.'[37]

Discoveries made during research about Bensley's and society's attitudes to women clearly evidenced masculinist thinking. Thus, what Pester describes as 'embodied motives of researching' were formed as I read and responded to the archive: that is, the material led me to refocus my research and I learned to 'resist the normative lenses and functions of archive documents and prescribed relationships with them.'[38] To concentrate on the women in the story, I adopted female-centric methods of research and commentary. Like Pester, I began to treat 'the archive as an interactive apparatus of discursive materialities through which new narratives […] can be produced.'[39] However, in wishing to 'give voice' to the women I had fleshed out during my research, I was also in danger of erasing their true selves and inventing

[35] 'Highway and Byeway: The Mounted Postboy', *Cornish and Devon Post*, 18 April 1908, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
[36] 'Trouble for Masked Man', *Kentish Independent*, 10 January 1908, 4.
[37] 'Dark Roasted Blend: The Man In The Iron Mask', *Dark Roasted Blend* (blog), June 2010. http://www.darkroastedblend.com/2010/06/man-in-iron-mask.html.
[38] Pester, 'Archive Fanfiction', 117.
[39] Pester, 'Archive Fanfiction', 116.

them in the same way Bensley had done when he ignored the facts of his first two marriages and gave his third wife a false history. Pester compares this sort of ventriloquising to 'the traditions of imperial excavation of archive material and the kind of power trip that places the researcher, first, in a supposed position of objective reader and, then, dominant narrator.'[40] My solution was to embrace this narrator role and make it explicit. By using memoir and through the creation of the imagined 'spirit' of Bensley's second wife, I made clear to the reader the subjective nature of my interpretation of the female-centric research. I was not so much giving Bensley's wives a voice but giving them 'my' voice. My act of ventriloquism also came in the context of a narrator who, like the women in Bensley's story, was struggling with gendered responsibilities and societal expectations.

My use of memoir also allowed me to explore the interchangeability and interdependency of past, present, fact and fiction. Because of my childhood experiences this examination was both a familiar and, at times, uncomfortable process. I wished to explore how both the false narrative and the truth could be (and had been) simultaneously valid: that the myth of a happy family—or great adventure—was as solid and present as the chaos and pain behind the 'story'. My parents, for good reason, controlled the narrative. Bensley, for nefarious reasons, embedded a narrative which allowed him to control his public persona and have others ignore the cruelty and falsehoods he imposed. Both my parents and Bensley were able to disseminate a narrative because they held power: my parents because I was a child; and Bensley because he was a heterosexual white male posing as a member of the ruling classes. The imposition of narratives was, and is, therefore, a question of who holds power within family and society.

Writing autobiographically allows those that have had narratives imposed upon them to speak back from the margins. *Inside the Mask's* autobiographical element was a method by

[40] Pester, 'Archive fanfiction', 116.

which I countered narratives which had been imposed upon me and Bensley's wives. Using an auto/bio/fiction/psychogeography hybrid enabled me to explore the boundaries between fact and fiction, truth and lies in my own and Bensley's wives' lives and bring each to light. Chapters One, Two and Three of this critical commentary contextualise *Inside the Mask* within the tradition of women writing their lives, particularly those who manipulate genre through nontraditional autobiographical narrative forms. I interrogate how these authors explore 'competing' stories, 'true' stories, and stories submerged, subverted, or falsified by familial, patriarchal or other influences.

My research in Chapter One took me right back to the first autobiography written in English: *The Book of Margery Kempe.* Kempe was unorthodox in both her life and writing. With use of bold anecdotes told without chronological ordering, Kempe counters false narratives, exploring how masculinist narratives impacted her pilgrimages and how lies were imposed upon her. Although it was the first autobiography, we also see within the work a manipulation of genre whereby Kempe used the protective devices of a scribe and *humilitas* to mimic the hagiographies of saints.

In Chapter Two, I explore the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, in particular her genre-redefining autobiographical works, *Mary: A Fiction*,[41] and *Letters Written During a Short Residency in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*.[42] In *Mary*, Wollstonecraft reimagined autobiography to compete against masculinist narratives which, she believed had submerged, subverted, or falsified women's true feelings, creating what is now known as 'autofiction'. In *Letters*, she once again broke genre conventions in her travelogue/memoir about her journey to Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Through treatises on politics and geography, autobiographical details, hints about an unhappy relationship and a submerged secret quest, she

[41] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979).
[42] Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark and Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1987).

creates what would now be known as psychogeography. Both she and Kempe walked, as Bensley and I do in my text, and the subversive nature of this is explored.

My third chapter explores the work of contemporary author, Julie Myerson, who, as I did, combined autobiography and biography in her creative nonfiction *The Lost Child.*[43] She interweaves the narrative of her troubled relationship with her son alongside her research into the life of Victorian watercolourist Mary Yelloly. The ethics of writing about family, and who has the right to control the narrative, are discussed. Myerson's 2022 book, *Nonfiction: a Novel,*[44] also fuses verifiable autobiographical elements with fiction and continues with the theme of motherhood and difficult relationships with one's children. I discuss the work of Rachel Cusk, Julie Myerson, and Maggie Nelson in terms of the critical reception they received as mothers who write and their resulting emotions and practice. I explore how Alison Bechdel, Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti and Julie Myerson integrate their process as authors into autobiographical narratives to ensure a realistic representation of their practice and the impact it has on their lives.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I return to my practice and discuss my research methodology which included autoethnography and situationist practices—methods which collapse boundaries between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others. I discuss how I interacted and reacted to the theories of Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord, asking if Benjamin's 'ultrareceptive' state, deemed necessary for *flânerie*, is possible for the female psychogeographer.[45] Using the work of W.G. Sebald, Will Self, and Ian Sinclair, I interrogate psychogeography as a method by which the boundaries of past and present are explored. I examine the ethical implications of conflating fact and fiction,

[43] Julie Myerson, *The Lost Child* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).
[44] Julie Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel* (London: Corsair, 2022).
[45] Keith Bassett, 'Walking as an Aesthetic Practice and a Critical Tool: Some Psychogeographic Experiments', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 28, no. 3 (November 2004): 397–410, 399.

and why psychogeography has historically been seen as a masculinist practice. I explore the work of female artists and writers, Sophie Calle, Lauren Elkin, Noreen Masud, and Virginia Woolf to interrogate their practice as psychogeographers. They collapse boundaries of time and place in their work and use memoir to explore stories that have been submerged or subverted by masculinist or imperialistic interpretations of geography and society. Using the work of artist Jeremy Deller, I examine the efficacy of reenactment for historical and autoethnographical research and relate this to decisions made for *Inside the Mask*, exploring how the past can be examined in the present.

Chapter 1: The Audacious Genre-creating Life-Writing of Margery Kempe.

In his 1936 introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, R.W. Chambers describes Kempe as 'a difficult and morbid religious enthusiast'. He adds, 'Perhaps harsher terms might be justly used.'[46] It was this 'difficult' nature that allowed illiterate pilgrim, Margery Kempe, born in 1373, to take the unusual and dangerous decision to dictate her pilgrimages and life to a scribe.[47] *The Book* is an account of Kempe's life from early adulthood. It documents her responsibilities as a homemaker and mother of fourteen children, her relationships with friends and families, and recounts her pilgrimages to the Holy Land and Europe. Outside of her town and religious community, she was relatively unknown, yet she chose to manipulate the medieval tradition of writing about female saints to give validity to her story.

As Kempe was the first autobiographer of either sex in the English language,[48] the *Book* was important in my research into autobiographical writing. It also relates to *Inside the Mask* because in inventing a new English language genre, Kempe discovered a form in which her 'truth' acts as a counterbalance to subverted and falsified narratives. In Kempe's case, these were narratives about female pilgrims created and disseminated by the masculinist society and hierarchy of the time. Kempe argued that her own particular 'feminine' form of worship—

[46] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. W. Butler-Bowdon (London and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1936), xxv.
[47] Modern editions of *The Book* are based on a manuscript copied by a scribe named Salthows, sometime in the fifteenth century, and was rediscovered and verified in 1934. However, excerpts had been published in pamphlets by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501 and Henry Pepwell in 1521. See: Anthony Bale, 'Richard Salthouse of Norwich and the Scribe of The Book of Margery Kempe', *Chaucer Review* 52, no. 2. (2017): 173–187, 173.
[48] There are almost universal accounts of it being the 'first' autobiography in the English Language. An example can be found in the blurb for the Oxford University Press version. See: Kempe, Margery, *The Book of Margery Kempe* by Margery Kempe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

weeping, wailing and the wearing of 'virginal' white vestments—was not only as acceptable as men's practice but preferable.

Unlike the narrator in *Inside the Mask*, Kempe refuses to obey physical and social boundaries, despite her gendered responsibilities. *In Maria; Or The Wrongs of Woman*, written three centuries after Kempe authored the *Book*, Wollstonecraft writes that 'the laws of her country—if women have a country—afford her no protection or redress from the oppressor'.[49] Kempe too suffered from the idea that women were stateless, belonging only at home with their husbands and children, yet she boldly demands she go on pilgrimages. In the first instance, she asks her husband's permission, and he travels with her: 'She asked her husband to grant her leave, and he, full trusting it was the will of God, soon consenting, then went to such places as she was inclined.'[50] Later she travels alone, which is sometimes deemed as 'illegal', as demonstrated in York, when a cleric demands a 'letter of record' from her husband to verify her right to travel. Kempe replies, fully aware of the unfairness of this request, 'my husband gave me leave with his own mouth. Why fare ye thus with me, more than ye do with other pilgrims that be here, who have no letter any more than I have.'[51] One presumes that the 'other pilgrims' were mainly male as Kempe rarely mentions other female travellers—the main exception being Dame Margaret Florentyne, but with her 'many Knights of Rhodes, many gentlewomen, and much good baggage'[52] she was a different class of traveller to Kempe, and, presumably, did not wail or preach like Kempe.

According to Liz Herbert McAvoy in her paper on the writings of Dame Julian of Norwich and Kempe, 'incursion into the public arena would often be tolerated if the woman were seen to be conducting herself 'appropriately' as wife and mother [but Kempe] resolutely

[49] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, 159.
[50] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 29.
[51] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 159.
[52] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 102.

refuses to do unless for purposes of expediency'.[53] In the *Book*, Kempe is open about giving birth to her children, and willing to go into detail about her husband's behaviour towards her, but she always places herself firmly in the centre of the narrative and, unlike my narrator in *Inside the Mask*, rarely frames herself as a wife and mother. In fact, in her life, she spurned these roles. Much of the *Book* is taken up with Kempe's desire to wear white, a symbol of virginity, and the church elders disallowing this because she is a married childbearing woman. When she disobeys and wears white robes, she is constantly mocked and, at one point, threatened with fetters by the archbishop.[54] Yet, she continues in this performative act of faith, visually challenging societal norms. As such, she is a transgressive figure who, as Terence Bowers writes in his paper on 'Margery Kempe as Traveller',[55] occupies a tenuous place in the usually masculine occupation of pilgrimage. Threatened by her transgression, the townsmen of Beverley tell her to 'forsake this life that thou hast, and go spin and card as other women do and suffer not so much shame and so much woe.'[56] Thus, respectability is represented by the gendered tasks of spinning and carding wool, whereas pilgrimage and Kempe's weeping religiosity is seen as a source of shame.

Kempe is not only viewed as a transgressive individual, but also able to influence others into transgression. When her servant threatens to leave Kempe in Zierikzee, her fellow travellers approve of this decision, saying 'they would take her maiden away from her, so that

[53] Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (U.K.: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 5.
[54] She first goes to the Bishop of Lincoln who refuses the request to wear white – 'a cause he feigned through counsel of his clerks, for they loved not this creature.' Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 46. He does, however, give her money for white clothes which she might be able to wear if the Archbishop of Canterbury permits it. However, when she visits the archbishop in the next chapter, it is unclear if she asks to wear white as she seems to only ask to choose her own confessor and have holy communion every Sunday, something which she needs a letter for. This, he grants. Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 46. At some point she does get her white vestments as, in Chapter 34, in Rome, a priest demands she wears black instead. In Chapter 38, she recalls she was permitted to wear white again, but we learn in Chapter 44, after she asks Jesus for permission, that she has no money for such clothes. She is lucky enough to meet a rich man in Norwich who pays for an outfit. Throughout, within the many changes of outfit, it is clear that it is the men (including Jesus) who give permission for what colour clothes she is permitted to wear.
[55] Terence N. Bowers, 'Margery Kempe as Traveler', *Studies in Philology* 97, no. 1 (2000): pp 1-28, 8.
[56] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 169.

she should no strumpet be, in her company.'[57] The Mayor of Lincoln has Kempe arrested mainly because she will 'have our wives away from us, and lead them with thee.'[58] In Beverley, one of the accusations levelled against her is that she encouraged 'Lady Greystoke to forsake her husband' which, it seems, is enough of a sin 'to be burnt for.'[59] Similarly, the Archbishop of York's clerks do not want Kempe living amongst them because 'the people have great faith in her dalliance, and peradventure, she might pervert some of them' and the Archbishop makes her 'swear that thou wilt neither teach nor challenge the people of my diocese'.[60]

It is these voices about what is correct behaviour for mothers and women which is represented in *Inside the Mask* through the words of X, who writes that the narrator is not a 'proper mother'.[61] My narrator questions herself and internalises X's words—for example, the narrator asks herself, 'I wonder if X had been right all along.'[62] However, Kempe, with great bravery, refuses to obey the archbishop with the proto-feminist religious argument that God had appeared to her and said, 'Blessed be the womb that bore Thee, and the teats that gave Thee suck',[63] demonstrating that, as God had spoken directly to her, a woman, she had permission to speak. This argument about God-given sexual equality was to be echoed by Wollstonecraft, discussed in Chapter Two.

Throughout Kempe refuses 'victimhood'. She is unafraid to call out the wrongs done to her and holds others to account. On visiting the Archbishop of Canterbury (who holds the power over whether she is allowed to wear white vestments or not) she 'reproves [him for] the bad behaviour of his clergy and household.'[64] In Chapters 46 and 53, she also reports being arrested in Leicester and Beverly for Lollardy—a proto-protestant religious movement begun

[57] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 79.
[58] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 151.
[59] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 175.
[60] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 163.
[61] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 25.
[62] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 49.
[63] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 164.
[64] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 47.

by John Wycliff. Kempe never had any association with Lollardy but was, presumably, accused of doing so because, like Wycliff, she was not afraid to say the clergy had fallen into sin.[65] Nor is she afraid to report sexual violence. Although she wouldn't have termed it in such a manner, Kempe speaks of being continually raped by her husband: 'He would have his will and she obeyed, with great weeping and sorrowing that she might not live chaste […] He would not spare her.'[66] She later protects herself from her husband's assaults by telling him God will strike him dead if he has sex with her,[67] yet she is still not free from sexual violence and intimidation. In Leicester, after an arrest, the steward 'led her into his chamber and spoke many foul bawdy words unto her, purposing and desiring, as it seemed to her to oppress her and ravish her'.[68] Many of the protagonists she describes are identifiable, either through their names or roles.

As an author, I was much less brave than Kempe. Although I wrote down X's texts verbatim to demonstrate his unreasonable behaviour,[69] feedback received from *The Literary Consultancy* stated that agents might not pick up my book because there was a danger of defamation when I was writing about my memories of him. Therefore, I blurred the lines between fact and fiction within the short stories recounting X's past violent behaviour.[70] This was a conscious choice to allow unverifiable actions to sit in an unquantifiable space.

Kempe had no such qualms, even though her 'truth-telling' could be seen as dangerous feminist propaganda. Kempe, as McAvoy writes, 'frequently represents the male participants [of pilgrimages] as unpredictable, unfixed and lacking in the necessary spiritual commitment.'[71] Kempe elevates the status of herself as a female pilgrim by recounting the bad

[65] 'Wyclif, John', in *Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2007), 626.
[66] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 16.
[67] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 30.
[68] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 157.
[69] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 25, 41 and 46.
[70] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 59-60.
[71] Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 5.

behaviour of male participants. Speaking to the Archbishop of York, she tells a story about a priest who had given himself to 'gluttony and excess, to lust of [his] body, through lechery and uncleanliness […] swearing, lying, detraction and back-biting.'[72] By calling out unwelcome male behaviour, she fights back against the popular view embedded into the contemporaneous literature that it was the female pilgrim who lacked sexual propriety. This popular view can be seen, most clearly, in Chaucer's depiction of the Wife of Bath.[73] Married five times, unafraid to lecture the other pilgrims about sex, and wanting another husband, the Wife of Bath demonstrates what Alistair Minnis calls a 'gleeful defence of female desire',[74] but which Helen Cooper notes is 'part of the vast medieval stock of antifeminism.'[75] Susan Morrison also writes how medieval literature transformed the female pilgrim into a symbol of aberrance in order to reinforce societal norms.[76]

Any pilgrimage by a woman was transgressive. For Kempe to reframe women as not only worthy pilgrims but superior to men was a dangerous act which could have led to imprisonment or even death. Thus, Kempe represents truth-telling in its purest form, seemingly unafraid of the consequences. Kempe continued to transgress norms by writing about her personal faith. To write was to envision a reader outside the proscribed margins of her social confinement. To show the female body beyond the homestead, and to give voice to personal thoughts and feelings (no matter how religious), was to contravene societal boundaries.

There were two measures within the final form of Kempe's text which gave her a modicum of protection. The first was by using *humilitas* which female medieval writers used

[72] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 161.
[73] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).
[74] A. J. Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 251.
[75] Helen Cooper, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 141.
[76] Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

to lower their status. Dame Julian of Norwich, whom Kempe claims to have met,[77] writes: 'Botte god forbede that he schulde saye or take it so that I am a techere, for I meene nouht soo, no I mente nevere so'.[78] Kempe calls herself 'this creature' and 'Our Lord's own secretaries'.[79] Although *humilitas* was a common trope for the religious author, Kempe rarely stuck to convention and, throughout her pilgrimages showed no sign of humility towards the religious orders and strictures of her day. Despite the notion that in Kempe's time, as Alistair Minnis writes, 'The female body and its alleged natural attributes made preaching generally impossible',[80] Kempe ignored these societal views and preached anyway. A monk at Canterbury, enraged her public citation of the Bible, wished to imprison and silence her, saying, 'I would thou wert enclosed in a house of stone, so that, there, no man would speak with thee.'[81] As Kempe battles against all conventions, demanding what she believed were her 'God-given' rights, she would have had no problem elevating her status beyond 'this creature'. However, as McAvoy argues, these topos of humility were more than a customary trope and 'it served as a type of screen behind which [she] necessarily had to operate as a [female] writer.'[82]

Kempe's second measure of protection attempts to subvert questions of validity through the third person. The scribe uses third person to describe himself, and Kempe's persona is also written in the third person. This use of a male scribe allows for a distancing between the female interlocutor and the (majority) male reader. Lynn Staley, in an introduction to her 1996 edition of the *Book*, argues the scribe 'meliorates the inherent radicalism' as it locates the work as a religious exemplum and 'assimilates it to sacred biography in which the lives of holy women

[77] Julian of Norwich 'showed her the grace that God put into her soul, of compunction, contrition, sweetness and devotion.' Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 54.
[78] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (London: Methuen, 1901), 47-8.
[79] The term 'this creature' is scattered throughout the text. For 'Our Lord's own secretaries' see: Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 120.
[80] Minnis, *Fallible Authors*, 246.
[81] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 54.
[82] Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body*, 5.

[…] were verified by male scribes.'[83] Also, authority is imbued upon the text because Kempe's scribe is a priest whom, we presume, believes her story worthy enough to write down.[84] Using the testimony of the priest, who (through Kempe's voice) confirms two stories in which her predictions were borne out, adds authenticity to Kempe's nascent saint narrative.

There are also two prefaces which emphasise the third person framework. The first—a proem—in which the Priest speaks about himself in the third person, informs the reader of the reason for the *Book*, which is to comfort sinners, and sets out its history. The priest tells how, for many years Kempe had been attempting to have her life-story written. As she could neither read nor write, she chose a Dutch man to be her scribe. However, the Dutchman's text was, according to the priest in the preface of the document we have today, 'so evil-written […] neither good English or Dewch, nor were the [letters] shaped or formed.'[85] She paid another man to read and transcribe the Dutchman's text, but it was such a difficult job, he only managed 'about a leaf'.[86] After four years of refusing Kempe's requests, the priest agreed to scribe the book using the Dutchman's material, the single leaf, and Kempe's words. This history of the book and its predecessors, written by at least three men, lays credence to the idea that Kempe's story is both worth telling and based on unchanging facts. The second preface, also written in the third person, immediately sets the tone as Kempe is referred to as 'a creature' who was prideful before she was drawn to Christ. The reader is told that the order of events in the book is not chronological, but as Kempe could remember them. Thus, her methodology is explicit, and expectations set.

[83] Lynn Staley, 'Introduction' in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, by Margery Kempe (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), 3.
[84] Kempe describes how she was so desperate for the priest to transcribe her words that she would, against her better judgement, indulge his desire for Heaven sent predictions. 'And so this creature, compelled somewhat for fear that he would not otherwise have followed her intent to write this book, did as he prayed her, and told him her feelings as to what would befall in such matters as he asked her.' Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*,71.
[85] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 4.
[86] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 5.

By using a scribe, Kempe positions her readers as accidental bystanders, listening in on her 'confessions' to her priest. Although the priest writes in his preface that the *Book* is to comfort sinners, Kempe herself does not seem to consider her reader. One suspects that, for Kempe, her ideal audience would be those in power in the church, who could deify her. This positioning of the ordinary reader as accidental bystander increases the readers' trust in the veracity of Kempe's words: we do not feel manipulated, and the words seem so well-worn they must be based in truth. (Or at least what Kempe believes to be true.)

For the majority of *Inside the Mask,* I used first-person present tense and a tone which, I hoped, mimicked the straight-forward narration of Kempe and the idea of the reader as an accidental witness. I wished the reader to understand that, like Kempe, I was telling the 'truth'. Positioning the readers inside the narrator's body also encouraged the reader to experience the same shocks the narrator underwent when finding out the truth about Harry's frauds, her husband's unexpected psychosis, and the assault. Unlike Kempe's unwavering righteousness, my narrator does not gain confidence in her right to tell her truths until the end of the book. My use of first-person present tense, therefore, allowed my narrator to travel the narrative arc of self-blame to acceptance in the present-tense telling of her story.

As in the *Book,* I also included a framework in which others' voices could be included. This didn't come in the form of prefaces or anecdotes but, because my subjects were long-dead and could not speak for themselves, were written as small pieces of fiction. In these sections, I played with the positioning of the readers, adapting point of view and distance according to what I wished to describe and the effect I wanted. Kempe writes as an older woman looking back on her life. This was the position from which I wrote Lily's first-person monologues. However, it was important for me to include reflection and regret, which Kempe rarely displays, to garner sympathy for Lily who could have been viewed as an accomplice in Bensley's most audacious frauds. In the fictions which described sections of Bensley's life (for

example, the arson),[87] I chose a third-person past-tense omniscient narrator to mimic Edwardian literature and to distance the reader (and narrator) from his actions, allowing a romantic unconfrontational view of his behaviour, necessary at the beginning of the book when the narrator viewed him in a sympathetic light.

In her work on 'auto-narration' in Romantic Narrative texts, Tilottama Rajan claims that 'autobiography assumes a straightforward relation between representation and experience that allows the subject to tell her life story in the form of constative or performative utterance: either as it was or as it becomes through the act of rewriting.'[88] In splitting my book into four sections and naming them 'Acts' and 'Curtain Call', I embraced this idea of a 'performative utterance', recognising that all sections of the story—Bensley's lies, the facts about him and his wives, and my life—had been 'performed' and narrated with varying degrees of authenticity. Indeed, recognising this element of 'performance' when writing about real lives, my narrator speaks of her desire to write Bensley's life into, 'A verb of a book.'[89]

Kempe's text is a brutally honest 'performative utterance' with the deliberate intent to show her particular style of religiosity—weeping and wailing—is not only a valid form of expression but one which was much holier than the gatekeepers of the Church and the public allowed.[90] I recreated my life in order to explore the boundaries between truth, lies, fact, fiction, past and present; the *Book* recreates a life in order to articulate, demonstrate and argue for a female response to Christ within a masculinist society and religion. In doing so, Kempe embraces the type of personal revelations that are more reminiscent of a twenty-first century 'no-holds-barred' memoir and uses the reader (and her scribe) as though they are in the

[87] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 40-42.
[88] Tilottama Rajan, *Romantic Narrative Shelley, Hays, Godwin, Wollstonecraft* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 110.
[89] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 221.
[90] Although crying is an unusual expression of Christian devotion, there are two examples in the literature, St. Mary of Oignies (d.1213) and St. Thalelaeus (d. 450). However, unlike Kempe, neither were accused of loud wailing. See: Alban Butler, Herbert Thurston, and Donald Attwater, *Butler's Lives of the Saints* (Texas: Christian Classics, 1996). Oignies, 698. Thalalaeus, 705.

confessional box with her. Staley believes that 'The combined effect of such prefatory remarks [...] creates an elaborate fiction. [...] Though frequently characterized as the first autobiography in English, we might instead think of it as a fiction (the first novel?).'[91] Comparing the 'character' of Margery to Chaucer's Geoffrey in *The Canterbury Tales* and Langland's Will in 'Piers', Staley argues that Kempe while having 'a foundation in reality', uses her own story as a way of examining 'key issues of late medieval England.'[92] Although I agree that Kempe does engage in 'key issues' and the prefaces give an illusion of fictional structuring, the content of the *Book* has little obvious fictional crafting. An author wishing to create a character who would shine light on key issues and argue for acceptance of her particular form of worship, would, perhaps, create a more sympathetic 'fictional' alter-ego than Kempe does. Indeed, the first manuscript written by the Dutchman, had so 'much obloquy and slander of this creature that but few men would believe this creature',[93] yet Kempe did not request any of this be taken out only that it be made legible.

In the *Book*, Kempe is brutally honest about herself. She writes that her neighbours—'many men'—call her a 'false hypocrite' because 'Her weeping was so plenteous and continuing, that many people thought she could weep and leave off.'[94] She details her failures as a miller and brewer; she writes about sex with her husband that, 'she would rather, she thought, have eaten or drunk the ooze and the muck in the gutter than consent to any fleshly communing';[95] and she titles Chapter 4, 'Her temptation to adultery with a man, who, when she consents, rejects her.'[96] She is also never afraid to point out how much others disliked her. On arriving back in England after her trip to Venice, 'her countrymen forsook her and went

[91] Staley, 'Introduction' in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 8.
[92] Staley, 'Introduction' in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 8.
[93] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 7.
[94] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 17.
[95] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 16.
[96] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 18.

away from her leaving her alone. And some of them said that they would not go with her for a hundred pound.'[97]

Therefore, Kempe is hard to view either as a hypocrite or a fictional character. The reader is witness to truths that many would find uncomfortable to reveal—particularly when one is declaring oneself to be religious. Using one of the earliest known autobiographies, St Augustine's *Confessions,* written between AD 397 and 400, Jennifer Cooke in *Contemporary Feminist Life Writing* cites a passage where Augustine admits to stealing fruit as a child. Cooke writes that 'the ugly act has been a key signifier of the autobiographer's honesty and authenticity, assuring readers that their narrator is confessing all the bad alongside the good.'[98] In telling of my difficulties with X, my eldest son, and my husband—and my insecurities and doubts about these issues—I too tried to confess 'all the bad alongside the good.' Kempe's confessions of human fallibility and struggle, spoken through a scribe who corroborates her story, instil reader trust in Kempe, not as a cipher but as a real woman, and allow them to suspend their disbelief in the passages in which she has visions and communes directly with God.[99] We see that what could be read as a 'competing' story is, in fact, a 'true' story which had been submerged and subverted for masculinist reasons.

It was this 'truth-telling' style of narration which I wanted for *Inside the Mask* during the autobiographical elements. I wanted the 'truth' to stand in opposition to Bensley's lies. For the 'truth' to be recognised as real by the reader, the fallibility of the narrator had to be made clear. Kempe demonstrates a strong sense of self throughout *The Book*; my narrator's boundaries are far more permeable. The narrator views herself as Lily's scribe, rather than purely her creator. This enabled the conversational tone achieved by Kempe *and* demonstrates

[97] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 97.
[98] Jennifer Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 66.
[99] There are long passages in which Kempe describes her visions. A modern reader may, therefore, see Kempe as an unreliable narrator—however, we are in no doubt that she believes that what she saw was as real to her as her temporal world. We understand that she is telling her truth.

a collapsing of the boundaries of self, time, memory and story. My narrator even questions the nature of memory itself. After the assault on the narrator's husband and stepdaughter, the narrator writes:

> With a feeling of vertigo, I wonder if anything is real if time can be lost so easily. If memories do not form, what are we left with? And what is memory anyway? Memory is a memory of a memory: we never reach back to that exact first moment because we layer it over with imagined details, supposed colours, words and deeds. Unaware of the tricks our mind plays, we add people who weren't there; change settings. Memory is a palimpsest, just as much of a story as any novel.[100]

Unsure of her ability to tell any story—her own, Bensley's wives, or even Bensley's false story—my narrator gathers evidence and allies. She competes with the narratives laid out by Bensley and X by using both the archive and the imagination. The archive bolsters her argument through facts; the use of imagination allows for empathy. Both are methods by which the narrator can convince the reader *and herself* that the stories she believes are 'true'.

Audrey Lorde, in her seminal 1978 essay, 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action', calls for women to speak more openly about their lives. The essay concludes, 'it is not difference which immobilises us but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.'[101] Eager to tell her story, Kempe breaks the silence that was enforced on women who dared to act differently. Thus, she takes extreme risks with not only her reputation but those of her family, her detractors, and supporters. Unwilling to be silenced at any cost, she transgressed societal, gender, religious and genre boundaries in her life and in the writing of her life.

[100] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 195.
[101] Audre Lorde, 'The Transformation of Silence into Action', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, by Audre Lorde (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 40-45, 44.

Kempe's text has been variously described as 'autobiography', 'fiction', and, according to Clarissa Atkinson in *Mystic and the Pilgrim,* as 'a biography in the hagiographic mode'.[102] Jennifer Cooke in *Contemporary Feminist Life Writing* labels recent feminist life-writings as the 'new audacity'. Cooke defines the 'new audacity' as:

> Characterised by boldness in both style and content, willingness to explore difficult and disturbing experiences, the refusal of victimhood, and a lack of respect for traditional genre boundaries, new audacity writing takes risks with its author's and others' reputations, and even, on occasion, with the law.[103]

By using Cooke's definition, we see how Kempe's work was 'characterised by boldness in both style and content.' She was enthusiastic in her desire to 'explore difficult and disturbing experiences' and refused 'victimhood.' Through the very act of having her story scribed, Kempe broke with 'traditional genre boundaries' and 'risked her own and others' reputations'. Therefore, Kempe did not write a proto-traditional autobiography, hagiography or fiction. Instead, her text can be termed as 'audacious' feminist life-writing which transgresses genre boundaries.

In her analysis of early medieval female authors and autobiographers, Jennifer Summit in her chapter on 'Women and Authorship' sees medieval women's writing as 'a suspension, rather than assertion, of selfhood',[104] whereas Sharon Cadman Seelig, in her chapter on *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature*, argues medieval women writers 'construct the self in written form.'[105] Both statements could be true of Kempe's work, if her

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[102] Clarissa Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 33.
[103] Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing*, 7.
[104] Jennifer Summit, 'Women and Authorship', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 97.
[105] Sharon Cadman Seelig, *Autobiography and Gender in Early Modern Literature: Reading Women's Lives, 1600–1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

text is understood as an early work of 'new audacious' feminist life-writing. By necessity, Kempe suspended the self through *humilitas* and a scribe. Yet she also constructed a female self: one relational to and subverting the religious and social narratives of the time. In constructing the self, she demonstrates that stories submerged, subverted, or falsified by familial, patriarchal or other influences can find expression through autobiographical forms. In the creation of the first English Language autobiography, she found a vehicle to counter and challenge masculinist narratives about women.

The *Book* demonstrates a performance of self through Kempe's recounting of pilgrimages, her role as a mother, and the condemnation by society of her particular form of worship. My text too explored these themes yet does so from a position of the narrator not yet having Kempe's confidence as to what is the 'truth'. I deliberately start with the first word as 'I' and place the narrator in a domestic (gendered) setting, 'I'm at the sink, scrubbing at caked-on Weetabix and dried on noodles: the detritus of three careless teens.'[106] The narrator's husband arrives with a book written by a student, sparking the narrator's desire to write a book. Yet, she argues to herself, how can she write a book when she has so many family responsibilities? Thus, as Kempe's *Book* does, my text is an attempt to demonstrate the conflict (still present after six hundred years) between the role of mother and my particular form of worship, which is, at first Bensley, then the role of imagination and writing. Unlike Kempe, my narrator questions her right to tell her story throughout. By the end, all the false, submerged, and subverted stories emanating from Bensley's falsehoods and facts, the true-life stories of Kate, Lily and Mabel, and events and memories within the narrator's life have been examined. The last lines, 'I walk, one step in front of the other. I walk, and I walk for me',[107] speak to

[106] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 12.
[107] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 272.

how, through examination of the archive and the imagination, the narrator finally, like Kempe, has the confidence to believe in her right to tell her narrative.

Chapter 2: Audacity, Autofiction and Psychogeography in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft.

In *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Barbara Taylor describes Wollstonecraft as 'the canon-busting Woman Writer, the textual subversive'.[108] This can be clearly seen in her early novel written in 1788, *Mary: A Fiction,* where Wollstonecraft mixes autobiography and fiction: creating an early form of 'autofiction'; and in her 1796 travelogue *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark,* where she used what would now be termed as 'psychogeography'.

Margery Kempe invented the first English language autobiography to argue for a feminist reclamation of pilgrimage. Wollstonecraft takes the autobiographical genre and reinvents it. Through mixing fact, fiction, and subverting genre to depict a female lived experience, she writes about social inequality, desire, love, and the difficulties women experienced in marriage at a time when women were supposed to keep quiet about such things—themes which also appear within the *Book* and *Inside the Mask*. Also pertinent to my research is that Wollstonecraft, as Kempe did, walked alone in places women were not supposed to walk. Wollstonecraft's autobiographical experiments are an important part of a continuum of female life writing from Margery Kempe to modern day contemporary writers, including myself. In reimagining autobiography, her life writings compete against masculinist narratives which, historically, submerged, subverted, or falsified women's true feelings and were not a true representation of their lives. It is this idea of competing narratives written

[108] Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 252.

through unorthodox life-writing forms, which makes Wollstonecraft a vital research area in relation to *Inside the Mask.*

Jennifer Cooke in her book *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing,* states that 'the imbrication of life with intellectual ideas questions and arguments is a defining feature' of contemporary feminist life-writers.[109] This is certainly true of the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, clearly visible in her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women,*[110] but prevalent throughout her oeuvre. Although dying from complications in childbirth at the age of thirty-eight, Wollstonecraft had been a prolific and determined writer. Much of her work was published anonymously in the *Analytical Review*.[111] Those that carry her name range from educational manuals, novels, short stories for children, polemics, and travel writing. This output is startling when one considers Wollstonecraft's personal life which includes an unhappy childhood, a lack of formal education, love affairs gone wrong, a child out of wedlock, two years in revolutionary France, two suicide attempts, another pregnancy and marriage, and an early death from childbirth, aged thirty-eight. Wollstonecraft would have had much material for an autobiography, instead she first chose to couch autobiographical material in novel form in *Mary: A Fiction.*

Women autobiographers were rare at the time,[112] which may have been why Wollstonecraft chose the novel form to depict her life. Those that existed were usually famous because of their male connections and had dramatic stories to tell.[113] Wollstonecraft was not

[109] Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing*, 4.
[110] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men; A Vindication of the Rights of Women; Hints*, (London: Pickering & Chatto Ltd, 1989).
[111] Sally N. Stewart, 'Mary Wollstonecraft's Contributions to the Analytical Review', *Mary Wollstonecraft*, (Routledge, 2012), 427–39.
[112] A full list of female autobiographies written between 1720 to 1920 can be found in Barbara Kanner's reference guide. See: Barbara Kanner, *Women in Context: Two Hundred Years of British Women Autobiographers, a Reference Guide and Reader* (New York: London: G K Hall & Co, US, 1997).
[113] For two female authored autobiographies of note in the preceding thirty years before *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) see Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke, Youngest Daughter of Colley Cibber, Esq.* (London, 1755, Gale ECCO, Print Editions, 2018); and Laetitia Pilkington, *Memoirs of Mrs. Laetitia Pilkington, Wife to the Rev. Mr. Matthew Pilkington* (London, 1712-1750, Forgotten Books, 2020). Charlotte

yet famous and, having not yet gone to revolutionary France, most likely did not view her life as dramatic. It could also be that she wished to distance herself from the salacious tone of contemporaneous female-written autobiographies. Autobiography, before the twenty-first century, was generally seen as the domain of the serious middle-class white heterosexual male.[114] It had the tone of an exemplar in which, according to Paul Delany in his 1969 book *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century*, the author claimed, 'individual significance by virtue of some specific quality or accomplishment, or because he has been a witness to the affairs of the great.'[115] Although female-written autobiography is now much more common than it was, Linda Anderson, in her 2011 book *Autobiography*, writes, 'Insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine—and, we may add, Western and middle-class—modes of subjectivity.'[116]

Just as Kempe used a scribe and *humilitas* as a protective literary device to ward off criticism and I couched the worst of X's behaviour in flash fiction, it could be argued that Wollstonecraft, not yet famous, chose to reveal autobiographical material under the guise of a novel because this genre of writing was an accepted female occupation at the time.[117] Within a

Charke was an actress. She knew Henry Fielding and David Garrick. She was also famous for wearing men's clothes even when not on stage. Laetitia Pilkington was an Anglo-Irish writer who enjoyed the patronage of Jonathan Swift. She was infamous for publishing about her stint in debtor's prison and her husband's encouragement that she should form liaisons with other men to further his career. Despite the women's own notoriety, both, as was usual at the time, have subtitles which name check the men in their lives and show their relationship to them.

[114] As a full manuscript of *The Book of Margery Kempe* was not discovered until 1934, the work was not seen as part of the autobiographical cannon until the twentieth century. However, it is extremely likely that, even if it had been discovered earlier, it may well have been dismissed as an anomaly and autobiography would still have been seen as the preserve of the serious white middle-class male.

[115] Paul Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2015), 108. Roy Pascal, a mid-twentieth century and early critic of the genre, also wrote in 1960 that the quality of autobiography depends on 'the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing'. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 60.

[116] Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 3.

[117] Similarly, Wollstonecraft's first text that carried her name was an educational manual: one of the only vehicles of expression believed to be a suitable for the female writer. See: Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct in the More Important Duties of Life* (United Kingdom: J. Johnson, 1787).

novel an unknown woman could express not only aspects of her personal life but explore issues and themes she was not yet prepared to (or had not yet had the opportunity to) unleash within the strict confines of the social mores of the day. However, for Wollstonecraft, the use of the novel form was not simply a camouflage. 'I am then going to be the first of a new genus,' Wollstonecraft wrote to her younger sister Everina two years before *Mary* was published.[118] By which she meant that although women had made money from writing previously, Wollstonecraft was the first woman for whom short-notice literary criticism on demand provided a considerable part of her total income.[119] Her strong working relationship with the publisher Johnson meant that Wollstonecraft had the freedom to experiment with the full knowledge that, as he published and paid for all her work, he would risk any type of text written by her, even perhaps autobiography. Writing *Mary: A Fiction* in the form it took was, therefore, a choice.

In Wollstonecraft's first 'Fiction' we see a previously unparalleled attempt to write against what was expected of a female novelist, evidenced, in the first instance, through a character and plot which details violence, nontraditional forms of worship, passionate female to female friendships, and extra-marital relationships. The plot is as follows: Mary's father is abusive, and her mother favours her brother. Ignored by her family, Mary communes with God in the natural world and is an autodidact who wants to dedicate her life to charity work. However, her mother's dying wish is that Mary marries Charles, a rich man. Mary does so but is relieved when Charles goes abroad immediately after the wedding. Mary then falls into a passionate friendship with a local girl called Ann, who has consumption. The women travel to Lisbon for a cure. After Ann dies, Mary and another consumptive patient, Henry, fall in love. They cannot marry because of Charles so they return to England separately. However, when

[118] Clare Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1974), 4.
[119] Mary A. Waters, '"The First of a New Genus" Mary Wollstonecraft as a Literary Critic and Mentor to Mary Hays', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37, no. 3 (2004): 415–34, 416.

Henry takes a turn for the worse, Mary rushes to his side to care for him until he dies. Charles returns to England and the marriage limps along but Mary, at least, has her own money and some autonomy. By the end of the novel, it seems she is weak and may well die soon.

With echoes of Chamber's assessment of Kempe as 'a difficult and morbid religious enthusiast',[120] Barbara Taylor in her biography of Wollstonecraft calls the protagonist of *Mary* 'an irritating little saint'.[121] The character of Mary, like her author, certainly did not conform to the accepted religious ideals of her time.[122] She is far from discreet in other ways too and the text details religious ardour, adulterous love, and a female friendship so intense that it borders on the erotic. Mary looks to Ann, her best friend, 'to experience the pleasure of being beloved.'[123] Even perceptions of a supportive female friendship were, at the time, unusual in literature. In Eliza Heywood's *Love in Excess; or the Fatal Enquiry*, for example, she writes the female characters as rivals restricted by 'custom which forbids women to make a declaration of their thoughts.'[124] Wollstonecraft not only has her characters declare their thoughts but have them do so passionately. Claudia Johnson in her book *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* argues that that these elements of plot play with stereotypical gender expectations as Mary takes on a 'butch' role whereas Henry and Ann demonstrate hyper-femininity, 'making it impossible to maintain that masculinity inheres in male bodies alone.'[125] This 'passionate' female friendship and the extra-marital affair with Henry are not punished, and, although there is a hint that the narrator might die, this seems to be because the world is cruel, rather than punishment for sinning against the world.

[120] Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, xxv.
[121] Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, 98.
[122] A view best expressed by Hannah More in 1799 when she writes that, for women, 'The influence of religion is to be exercised with discretion.' Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 8th ed., vol. 1 (London: Printed for A. Strahan, 1800), 7.
[123] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, 8.
[124] Eliza Haywood, *Love in Excess* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000), 2.
[125] Claudia L Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 53.

It is not only in the subject of theme and plot that Wollstonecraft reacts against binary thinking and the mores of her time—it is also through the subverting of genre. Dr Octavia Cox argues in a lecture on Wollstonecraft that when Wollstonecraft uses the subtitle, *'A Fiction'* she is deliberately eschewing the more common genre categories of eighteenth-century literature, which were 'A Novel' or 'A History'.[126] Breaking down the reasons for rejecting these two terms gives insight into Wollstonecraft's ideology. A proto-feminist, Wollstonecraft rejected the appellation of 'novel' for two reasons. Firstly, 'novels', at the time, were seen as unserious with scandalous prose,[127] and Wollstonecraft believed herself to have a mind as quick as her male philosopher friends. In her preface (titled an 'advertisement'), Wollstonecraft calls her work 'an artless tale without episodes',[128] that is: unflowery prose without set pieces. This is not an apologia but more a manifesto for reason and plain speaking. In eschewing the word 'novel', she was raising her status as a writer.

Secondly, there were political reasons for refusing the term 'novel' which focused on reader response. In *Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft condemns 'novels, music, poetry and gallantry [as they] all tend to make women the creatures of sensation [which] prevents intellect'.[129] In *Mary*, the character of the mother is made an object of fun, 'because she sent to the metropolis for all the new publications, and while she was dressing her hair, and she could turn her eyes from the glass, she ran over those most delightful substitutes for bodily dissipation, novels.'[130] Wollstonecraft's preface to *Mary* condemns other texts that:

[126] Octavia Cox, 'Mary Wollstonecraft Novel Mary A Fiction—Genre, Gender & Feminism—18th Century Literature ANALYSIS', YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGlVnff6FHo.
[127] Octavia Cox believes that the reason the word novel has the largest font on the title page of Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess* is to signal to the reader that the work would be scandalous. Cox, 'Mary Wollstonecraft Novel'.
[128] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, advertisement.
[129] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 130.
[130] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, 2.

> only have power to delight, and carry us willing captives, where the soul of the author is exhibited, and animates the hidden springs. Lost in a pleasing enthusiasm, they live in the scenes they represent; and do not measure their steps in a beaten track, solicitous to gather expected flowers, and bind them in a wreath, according to the prescribed rules of art.[131]

Just as my narrator in *Inside the Mask* discovers how false narratives mask hard truths about her past and present life, so Wollstonecraft sees 'novels' as an opiate masking reality. 'Novels', she is arguing, are used as escapism and do not expect the (female) reader to reflect on their own lives. Wollstonecraft objects to the 'prescribed rules of art' by which she means the topos of romance fiction in which the woman is seen as weak and pliable. Further along in the preface, Wollstonecraft says of her protagonist, 'This woman is neither a Clarissa, a Lady G——, nor a Sophie'.[132] These were heroines who were popular at the time, and who were 'virtuous' or even 'perfect' and, therefore, based in male fantasies of the 'ideal'.[133]

Another terminology option for Wollstonecraft would have been to choose the appellation 'History'. Yet, to write a 'History' in the eighteenth century was to lay claim that the texts were true accounts. Richardson used this term in *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*[134] and in his subtitle for Clarissa.[135] He also names himself the editor of these and

[131] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, advertisement.
[132] Wollstonecraft is referring to three female characters in popular books of the time. For Clarissa see: Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady.* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985). For Lady G see: Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972). For Sophie see: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (London: J.M. Dent, 1933).
[133] Wollstonecraft returns to her dislike of Rousseau's Sophie in Chapter 5 in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women,* which is subtitled, 'Animadversions on some of the writers who have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt.' Over the space of fifteen pages, Wollstonecraft focuses on Rousseau's argument that a woman should be 'weak and passive because she has less bodily strength than man; and hence [he] infers, that she render [sic] herself *agreeable* to her master - this being the grand end of her existence.' Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication,* 147. Wollstonecraft argues that although women may be physically weaker, they have been given equal reason by God, and as this reason is God-given they should not be seen as weak nor passive. This echoes Kempe's arguments noted in Chapter One.
[134] Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*.
[135] Richardson, *Clarissa*.

other books he wrote,[136] leading the reader to believe, as was common in the early history of novels, that the texts were penned by the protagonists. The author was not only absent from the text but, by using the term 'History', there was a pretence that they didn't exist. However, Wollstonecraft makes it clear that she is the writer in the opening lines of her advertisement: 'In delineating the Heroine of this Fiction, the Author attempts to develop a character different from those generally portrayed.'[137] In *Mary: A Fiction*, the act of creation is explicit, as is the desire to make the character 'different'.

There are no other books described as 'fiction' (in this context) before this date and fiction did not yet have the same meaning as it does today. In Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755, 'a fiction' has three definitions:

> (1) act of feigning or inventing;
>
> (2) the thing feigned or invented;
>
> (3) a falsehood, or a lye.[138]

None of these exactly describe Wollstonecraft's text as not all was 'invented' or 'feigned'. Yet by use of an example by Dryden under Johnson's definition 'fiction' was, Cox argues, entirely fit for what Wollstonecraft was attempting to do.[139] The example is: 'Fiction is the essence of poetry, as well as of painting; there is a resemblance in one of human bodies, thing, and actions, which are not real, and in the other of a true story by a fiction.'[140] This last clause—'a true story by [way of] a fiction'—is why, in essence, Wollstonecraft chose the appellation 'fiction'. In her advertisement, Wollstonecraft recognises that her heroine is unusual and says, 'in fiction,

[136] For example, see Samuel Richardson, *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008).
[137] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, advertisement.
[138] 'fiction, n.s.', *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755 edition, by Samuel Johnson (London: Times Books, 1983).
[139] Cox, 'Mary Wollstonecraft Novel.'
[140] 'fiction, n.s.'

such a being may be allowed to exist.'[141] That is, the word 'fiction' is not used to show that everything is made up. Details may have been inserted or embellished, but 'fiction', in this case, is used to demonstrate that one particular part of the book is untrue: that is, society's acceptance of Mary's religious and philosophical beliefs. It is a 'fiction', Wollstonecraft believes, for an intelligent female character to be able to express her (religious and sexual) thoughts without ostracization and condemnation. David Oakleaf, in his introduction to Heywood's *Love in Excess*, writes how Haywood 'laments that women cannot, like men, express their desire directly.'[142] Wollstonecraft overcomes this by reconfiguring her world. At the end of the advertisement, Wollstonecraft writes that the character of Mary was 'drawn by the individual from the original source.'[143] Therefore, the character of Mary is the woman Wollstonecraft could have been had the world been configured differently.

In 2011, David Shields identified a contemporary cultural phenomenon which he coined 'reality hunger', characterising it as 'the lure and blur of the real'.[144] His book, subtitled 'A Manifesto', was a celebration of authors who explored hybrid forms and a recommendation that writers obliterate the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. He believed that this would give rise to a new form for a new century. Wollstonecraft was using the same techniques two hundred years previously. In Wollstonecraft's first 'Fiction' we see a new genre emerge: one which explicitly uses aspects of the author's life within a make-believe world. She, for the first time in English Literature, does so unequivocally—making sure that both sides of the coin ('truth' and fiction') are clearly present through use of an author's preface and the title which immediately places the text in the autobiographical space. Any name could have been chosen, but she chooses her own. From the first chapter, Wollstonecraft uses real-life names and experiences from her childhood: for instance, the mother and father characters have the same

[141] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, advertisement.
[142] Haywood, *Love in Excess*, 11.
[143] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, advertisement.
[144] David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2011), 5.

names as Wollstonecraft's parents (although it is believed by Wollstonecraft's biographer, Barbara Taylor, that she based the characters on Earl and Lady Kingsborough whom she worked for as a governess).[145]

William Godwin, husband of Mary at the time of her death, published a memoir about her life from childhood.[146] The memoir is remarkable for its honesty—particularly Wollstonecraft's deathbed scene—and became controversial because Godwin included details about his wife's unconventional sex life.[147] Wollstonecraft's reputation, which had only been respected by the wider public up to that point, was destroyed. The *Anti-Jacobin Review*, for example, published a poem in 1801 calling Godwin a 'cuckhold' and Wollstonecraft a 'whore'.[148] Godwin also did her a disfavour by emphasising her 'feminine' 'submissive' nature which led her to later fall out of favour with second wave feminists.[149] However, because of the honest nature of this volume, it allows much insight into which parts of *Mary: A Fiction* were taken from life. Godwin describes Mary's father as being 'a despot, and his wife appears to have [been] the first, and most submissive of his subjects.'[150] In *Mary: A Fiction*, the father is described thus: '[The father] expostulated in the most cruel manner, and visibly harassed the invalid [the mother].'[151]

Mention is made in both texts of the preference of the mother for the eldest son. In Godwin's memoir we read, 'The mother's partiality was fixed upon the eldest son'[152] and in

[145] Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, 43.
[146] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*. Although beyond the scope of this essay, as critic Mitzi Myers has posited, 'the genesis and strategies of the *Memoirs* make them exemplary for the study of biography as the artistic construct resulting from the intersection of two personalities.' Mitzi Myers, 'Godwin's "Memoirs" of Wollstonecraft: The Shaping of Self and Subject', *Studies in Romanticism* 20, no. 3 (1981): 299–316, 304.
[147] B. Sprague Allen, 'The Reaction against William Godwin', *Modern Philology* 16, no. 5 (1918): 225–43, 230.
[148] C. Kirkpatrick Sharpe, 'The Vision of Liberty: Written in the Manner of Spencer [sic]', *Anti-Jacobin Review and* Magazine, Appendix, 9 (April-August 1801), 518.
[149] Cora Kaplan, 'Mary Wollstonecraft's Reception and Legacies' in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 256.
[150] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 205-6.
[151] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, 6.
[152] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 206.

Wollstonecraft's text, we see, 'the apparent partiality she [the mother] shewed to her brother gave [Mary] exquisite pain.'[153] Like Mary, Wollstonecraft was also deeply religious in her youth and prone to reverie, as evidenced by Godwin: 'When she [Wollstonecraft] walked amidst the wonders of nature, she was accustomed to converse with her God […] and her religion was almost entirely of her own creation.'[154]

It is not until we reach Chapter Five and the death of the brother that true fiction is realised. In this section Mary becomes an heiress and is married off to an unloving husband. However, even then real life reinserts itself with the character of Ann and her illness and death in Lisbon. As Godwin points out, Ann is strongly based on Wollstonecraft's childhood friend Fanny Blood, whom Wollstonecraft travelled to Lisbon to be with and was with her at her death from childbirth. In her biography of Wollstonecraft, Eleanor Flexner suggests that Henry, the romantic interest in *Mary* (and in her later book *Maria*), could be based on Henry Gabell, whom Wollstonecraft met while she was working for the Kingsborough family. Flexner writes, 'she had at least a passing sentimental interest in him' and 'was suffering, not just from pangs of unrequited affection, which are always painful, but from the whole traumatic pattern of reflection which overwhelmed her at the slightest excuse.'[155] It is certain, however, that Wollstonecraft, unlike Mary, didn't live with Henry's grieving mother on her return to England.

The novelisation of real-life experiences is a staple of all authors, yet Wollstonecraft, in her desire to show a character, not dissimilar to herself, being able to express true emotion and feelings, creates Mary as a cipher or avatar: someone, who, in an alternative (better) world could express and act upon sexual and religious desires. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft insists that reason is God-given and, therefore, to disallow women the

[153] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, 6.
[154] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 215.
[155] Eleanor Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (Maryland: Penguin Books Inc, 1973), 72-3.

power to reason through lack of education is to deny them what faith has promised.[156] (This also echoes Kempe's desire to worship in a way which she believes has been promised her by God.) Wollstonecraft imbues the character of Mary with this God-given reason. Mary is unusual—headstrong, deeply religious, and unwilling to conform to conventional social mores—yet Wollstonecraft was just this type of person too. In making Mary richer than herself, with an established social position, Wollstonecraft, as Flexner suggests, is declaring that her character has the 'the *responsibility* of being a thinking woman':[157] that is, Wollstonecraft uses her character to make a political point to the middle-class and gentry, suggesting that their duty is to show society that they are more than ciphers for male desire. By the end of the novel, Wollstonecraft is enough of a realist to have her character feel disillusionment. The only way out from society as it exists is, Mary believes, death. When she ponders on her demise 'a gleam of joy would dart across her mind—She thought she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying*, nor giving in marriage.'[158] The italics are Wollstonecraft's own and is a culmination of the novel's exploration into alternative modes of living, which Claudia Johnson defines as a novelistic space within which women are neither tied by their own bodies or the expectations of feminine behaviour.[159]

Tilottama Rajan, in her work on *Memoirs of Emma Courtney,* uses the term 'autonarration' to classify 'a larger tendency of Romanticism, in which writers bring details from their personal lives into their texts, speaking in a voice that is recognizably their own or through a persona linked to the biographical author.'[160] She believes 'the Romantic author enters the text neither as absolute ego nor as the mature and completed subject [...] but as a

[156] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, 83.
[157] Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 81.
[158] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, 68.
[159] Johnson, *Equivocal Being*, 47-58.
[160] Tilottama Rajan. 'Autonarration and Genotext in Mary Hay's "Memoirs of Emma Courtney."' *Studies in Romanticism* 32, no. 2 (1993): 149-176, 159.

subject-in-process represented by a figure, sometimes a dis-figuration, of the self.'[161] Unlike *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Rajan argues, *Mary: A Fiction,* 'is not a full-fledged autonarration because it does no more than evoke the trace of the personal through the titular reference to the author's name.'[162] However, as discussed, there is more than 'a trace of the personal' and we can assume that Mary 'speaks in a voice that is recognizably' Wollstonecraft's. Although labelled as a 'genius' by Wollstonecraft, Mary, by the end of the novel in which she is beaten down by circumstance, cannot be described as 'absolute ego nor as the mature and completed subject'. Rather, she is, as Rajan terms it, 'a subject-in-process.' Therefore, under Rajan's own definition, *Mary: A Fiction* could be described as 'auto-narration': the only caveat being the percentage of fact to fiction, which, at this distance is difficult to calculate but which we can surmise is much more heavily weighted to fiction than *Memoirs of Emma Courtney.*

However, I propose this text may be more properly termed 'autofiction.' In his 1977 blurb for *Fils*, Serge Dubrovsky coined the word autofiction when he dismisses autobiography as a eulogy of an 'important' life and promotes a new kind of 'fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will.'[163] He advocates, 'the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, traditional or new'.[164] Since Dubrovsky's coining of 'autofiction' the definition has shifted to mean texts in which the facts do not need to be 'strictly real', yet the author has inserted themselves, and some of their real-life events, into a narrative which uses fictional techniques, using what author Jarred McGinnis has called a process of 'the alchemising-self'.[165]

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[161] This idea of 'dis-figuration' echoes Paul de Man's seminal 'Autobiography as De-Facement'. De Man claimed it was impossible to conceive of autobiography as a genre separate from fiction. All knowledge, according to de Man, including self-knowledge depends upon figurative language. An autobiographical author, as much as a fiction writer, depends upon the creation of character through language. The author, in other words, uses prosopopoeia (creates a mask). Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', *Modern Language Notes* 94 (1979): 919-30.
[162] Rajan, *Romantic Narrative*, 82-116, 160.
[163] Serge Dubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Galilee, 1977), blurb.
[164] Dubrovsky, *Fils*, blurb.
[165] Jared McGinnis, Auto/Bio/Fiction in Practice: A Symposium, online, 2023.

This is certainly true of *Mary* and the use of the author's real-life name is a signifier that this work is a type of autofiction. Examples of autofiction writers who use real names include Sheila Heti in *How Should a Person Be?*,[166] Chris Kraus in *I Love Dick*,[167] and Karl Ove Knausgaard.[168] They use real names and personas to explore psychological truths—what might happen to a character with the same name and sensibilities as the author if the world was configured differently. This playfulness with time, setting, real-life events and characters is at the heart of the most exciting modern autofiction. David Vann, in *Legend of a Suicide*,[169] considers his father's suicide in a series of short stories. He creates a persona 'Roy' and imagines events that either could not have happened due to the physical laws of nature (Roy and his father fly away at one point) or could have happened but didn't because of the author's decisions in his real life. The most striking story in the collection takes place on an island in Northern Canada, where the adolescent Vann was invited but decided not to go. In this story 'Roy' goes to the island and is the one to die from suicide, rather than the father. Because the reader is aware that the real-life father committed suicide, they are aware of the metaphoric significance of the father having to carry his dead son around the island, unable to bury him in the frozen ground or use a boat because the sea had iced over. Vann, too, we see, had to carry the knowledge of his father's suicide and was unable to bury the horror. Eve Ensler does something similar in *The Apology* whereby she imagines her father writing a letter from the afterlife in order to apologise for his real-life abuse to the author.[170] Christine Angot, too, narrated her experiences of incest from a child's point of view.[171] She described this writing as

[166] Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?* (Harvill Secker, 2013).
[167] Kraus, *I Love Dick*.
[168] Knausgaard wrote a series of six autobiographical novels which used real names. The first one is the series is: Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family: My Struggle* (London: Vintage, 2013).
[169] David Vann, *Legend of a Suicide* (London: Penguin, 2009).
[170] Eve Ensler, *The Apology* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).
[171] Christine Angot, *L'inceste* (Paris: Stock, 1999).

‘an act of exorcism, an attempt to expunge from the heart, the soul, all the filth and pain inflicted by others.’[172]

I, too, found writing *Inside the Mask* a form of exorcism yet unlike the authors mentioned above I chose not to seamlessly mix fact and fiction in a stated work of autofiction. Because I wanted the ‘true’ stories of Bensley’s wives to be told, I garnered factual evidence to compete against Bensley’s false narrative and wrote about my own life as honestly as I could. I wished for the reader to trust that the narrator was telling the ‘truth’ about her life and was therefore telling the truth about Bensley and his wives. Therefore, the fictional elements of my book—the short stories written about Bensley and the appearance of Lily—were clearly signalled as works of the narrator’s imagination.

Although gendered constraints still exist, I, an unknown writer with no reputation to damage, have the privilege of being able to voice my ‘truth’ without using autofiction. Wollstonecraft, having made herself a strong reputation as an intellectual within a highly patriarchal society, may well have been reluctant to present her truth as fact. Mary is portrayed as fallible and prone to high emotion—it is doubtful Wollstonecraft would have been wished to be seen as such by her critics. By using a persona based on self in *Mary: A Fiction*, Wollstonecraft can interrogate in a prototypical autofictional way personal conflicts and issues that she may have been reluctant to air as herself. Margeret Walters in *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* writes that Wollstonecraft explores, through her character Mary, how unresolved feelings caused by childhood difficulties, ‘dominate, and even pervert, adult relationships.’[173] In a letter to Godwin, Wollstonecraft wrote that, ‘my imagination is forever betraying me into fresh misery, and I perceive that I shall be a child to the end of the chapter’.[174] One of her

[172] Tsipi Keller, ‘Tsipi Keller Reviews Incest by Christine Angot - Asymptote’, accessed 17 July 2024, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/christine-angot-incest/.
[173] Margaret Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 53.
[174] Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 348.

arguments in *Rights of Women* was that women were infantilised by men—perpetually doomed to relive the stories of their childhood over and over. Through autofictional techniques, Wollstonecraft was not only able to delve into the way her childhood had affected her adult self but ask the more political questions of how a woman 'genius' with strong religious and sexual feelings could exist within the mores of her day. She could also interrogate herself and her desire to have her strong feelings and emotions reciprocated. The character of Mary asks, 'have I desires implanted in me only to make me miserable? will they never be gratified? shall I never be happy? My feelings do not accord with the notion of solitary happiness.'[175]

It is the above questions, she returns to in her most traditionally autobiographical work *Letters Written during a Short residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark,* written in 1792. This is a travelogue in epistolary form, where she details a trip undertaken with her one-year-old child and a French nanny. The letters were written in the four months between two suicide attempts and an extremely troubled relationship with the father of her child, yet these issues are only hinted at. Instead, the book demonstrates Wollstonecraft's thoughts on the French Revolution, the social conditions of the countries she visited, and her feelings about a God she no longer quite believes in.

As in Kempe's time, to take the journey was, in itself, extraordinary. For any woman to have travelled without a male protector was unusual. Maria Edgeworth in *Practical Education* (1798) wrote: 'Girls must very soon perceive the impossibility of their rambling about the world in quest of adventures.'[176] But Wollstonecraft traversed Scandinavia at a time when much of Europe was at war with France and all journeys were hazardous. Northern Europe was not the place we know today: sea crossings were dangerous and unpredictable, roads were scarce and unpaved, serfs still existed, and there were few amenities or even much outsider

[175] Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman*, 40.
[176] Maria Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (Boston: J. Francis Lippitt and T.B. Wait, 1815), 292.

knowledge about the terrain. As Richard Holmes in his 1987 introduction to *Letters* points out, 'Almost the only previous topographical work on the subject was William Coxe's *Voyages and Travels* [1784], which provided little more than a series of geographical and economic notes.'[177] Added to this, Wollstonecraft had attempted suicide only weeks before, had a one-year-old child with her, and a French nanny who was nervous of travelling. Wollstonecraft was also given a dangerous task. Although never explicitly stated in the book (the reader understands she is there on some mysterious business), Holmes suggests that Wollstonecraft was searching for a missing cargo ship owned by the father of her child and ex-lover, Imlay. She was to ensure Imlay was recompensed.[178] This all took place while she was suffering from unrequited love and suicidal thoughts. Godwin writes, 'The most apprehensive reader may conceive what was the mental torture she endured, when he considers that she was twice, with an interval of four months, from the end of May to the beginning of October, prompted by it to purposes of suicide. Yet in this period she wrote her Letters from Norway.'[179]

In *The Book of Margery Kempe,* the author fashioned herself as a female disciple, eschewing the boundaries of what was expected of women. In *Letters*, Wollstonecraft fashions herself as an adventurer and social commentator of the type more normally expected in a man.[180] No sense of trepidation about her surroundings is found in the book, and she only mentions fear in relation to her feelings which she swiftly denies herself—'I would not permit myself to indulge the 'thick coming fears' of fondness, whilst I was detained by business'.[181]

[177] Richard Holmes, 'Introduction', in *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, by Wollstonecraft and Godwin, 19.
[178] 'Wollstonecraft was on a treasure-hunt in Scandinavia. She was to discover the fate of the treasure ship, the attitude of all parties concerned, and to reach if possible some financial agreement, probably on an 'out of court' basis.' Holmes, 'Introduction', 23.
[179] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 255.
[180] Wollstonecraft wasn't the first woman to embark on travel writing. Discounting Kempe, the most famous example is Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (b.1689 d.1762) who wrote about her travels in the Ottoman Empire. However, Montagu was of a different class from Wollstonecraft and was there with her husband. See: Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, Volume 1, eds. James Archibald Stuart-Wortley-Mackenzie Wharncliffe and William Moy Thomas (Cambridge: University Press, 2011).
[181] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 136.

As bravery is deemed a masculine trait, it could be perceived that Wollstonecraft was crossing gender boundaries. Yet, through her honesty about motherhood, and reflections on the social inequities women suffer, the book is quite clearly written by a female. Missing her child after an extended time away from her, Wollstonecraft writes, 'The bosom that nurtured her, heaved with a pang at the thought which only an unhappy mother could feel.'[182] Thus she writes about motherhood and its difficulties in a manner similar to modern writers such as Cusk, Enright, and myself (to be discussed later). In his *Memoirs,* Godwin wrote about *Letters*, 'If ever there were a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book. She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration.'[183]

It is this sense of the author allowing us glimpses of her true feelings which fuels much of the narrative drive of *Letters*. Although much of the material was taken from letters she wrote to Imlay, they are not verboten. She edits these letters and writes in her preface, 'My plan was to simply to endeavour to give a just view of the present state of the countries I have pulled through, as far as I could obtain information during too short a residence.'[184] No doubt, she also wished to include some 'sentimental' observations, such as those she had admired in Rousseau's 1782 *Promenades*,[185] and Sterne's 1768 *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*.[186] What she did not plan on revealing was her pain and loss. However, like Myerson, in *The Lost Child*,[187] unable to concentrate on her biography of Mary Yelloly because of

[182] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 158.
[183] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 249.
[184] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 62.
[185] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Confessions* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008). The image of Wollstonecraft as a 'solitary walker' (how Rousseau references himself) became a shorthand between Godwin and his wife to express how, although she longed for companionship, she often found herself alone. In a personal letter to Godwin, she writes, 'I—will become again a solitary walker.' Mary Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 337.
[186] Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001). Wollstonecraft references Sterne's *Journey* in her *Letters Written During a Short Residence*. 'My bosom still glows—Do not saucily ask, repeating Sterne's question, 'Maria, is it still so warm!"' Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 111.
[187] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, foreword.

internal and external drama off the page (discussed in Chapter Three), Wollstonecraft decides not to stick to her original plan and allows her real thoughts and feelings to seep onto the page. As she writes in her preface:

> I found I could not avoid being continually the first person—"the little hero of each tale." I tried to correct this fault, if it be one, for they were designed for publication: but in proportion as I arranged my thoughts, my letters, I found, became stiff and affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained.[188]

This quote speaks to the struggle women writers feel about writing themselves into the text—a struggle which formed a great deal of *Inside the Mask*'s narrative thread and one which I will further discuss in Chapter Three in relation to Cusk, Myerson and others. Aware of the risks, Wollstonecraft prioritises her art over the propriety of being without ego. She also chooses 'an artless tale', as she did in her preface for *Mary: A Fiction.* Wollstonecraft's 'unrestrained' reflections allow the reader a deep insight, not only into place and society, but self. And it is a self which is suffering. In Letter Eight, she hints at her suicide attempt: 'My imprudence last winter, and some untoward accidents just at the time I was weaning my child, had reduced me to a state of weakness which I never before experienced.'[189] But then, as though to excuse this or to reassure herself it will never happen again, she writes,

> the fear of annihilation—the only thing of which I have ever felt a dread—I cannot bear to think of being no more—of losing myself—though existence is often but a painful consciousness of misery; nay, it appears to me impossible that

[188] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 62.
[189] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 111.

> I should cease to exist, or that this active, restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organized dust.[190]

Because of these heartfelt hints, the reader sees the landscape, history and social observations as, not only secondary to Wollstonecraft's pain, but as a way for her to distract herself. She is writing the self in defiance of the urge to self-destruction, almost as though she is writing herself back into life. 'And here I am again,' she writes in Letter Eight, 'to talk of anything but the pangs arising from the discovery of estranged affection, and the lovely sadness of a deserted heart.'[191] Just as I write the narrator's feelings in real time in *Inside the Mask*, we see Wollstonecraft's emotional changes in real-time. She vacillates from berating Imlay for deserting his child—'I was returning to my babe, who may never experience a father's care or tenderness'[192]—to disgust at his businessman's attitude—'You—yourself, are strangely altered, since you have entered deeply into commerce'[193]—to praising him: 'I may venture to assure you that a further acquaintance with mankind only tends to increase my respect for your judgement, and esteem for your character.'[194]

All Wollstonecraft's books, particularly her polemics, have been criticised for being messy. Tomalin claims that *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* 'was a ragbag in which Mary stuffed the ideas she had picked up over the past few years in her reading and conversation, without any attempt to sort them out.'[195] Godwin too, noted how quickly Wollstonecraft wrote—often with a printer at her elbow: she 'seized her pen in the full burst of indignation, an emotion of which she was strongly susceptible. She was in the habit of composing with rapidity.'[196] Godwin also accused her of a lack of reason: 'She was often right [... yet] she

[190] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 112.
[191] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 100.
[192] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 158.
[193] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 191.
[194] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 122.
[195] Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 95.
[196] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 228.

reasoned little', unfairly likening the conclusions she came to as 'a kind of witchcraft'.[197] In the case of *Letters*, however, this rapidity and instinct serves her. Like in the use of first-person present text in *Inside the Mask*, we have the impression of being on the ground with Wollstonecraft, witness to all her thoughts and observations.

Max Saunders in his book on autobiography argues, 'Life-writing is fundamentally intertextual' in its dependence on sources such as letters, diaries, recalled conversations, other people's narratives, and the author's other literary works.[198] Amy Culley, in her book *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840*, believes that 'These inter-textual connections illuminate and, at times, complicate the self-representation in the narrative.'[199] In the case of *Letters*, the intertextuality benefits the narrative. Through use of conversations, others' anecdotes *and* the readers' ability to reference back to Wollstonecraft's arguments in *The Rights of Women* and other works, the text is rich and lively. Because these letters are written to an unnamed lover there is also, as in Kempe's *Book*, a sense, for the reader, of an overheard confessional, what Richard Holmes, in his introduction, calls an 'urgency of […] testament, swiftly composed at times of grief, when many of the barriers of reticence were down.'[200]

There is also the narrative drive of the task Imlay set her: to find recompense for a stolen treasure ship. As Holmes writes, 'It gives Wollstonecraft's travels their secret urgency, their sense of a mysterious, almost nightmare pursuit. It adds immeasurably to the feeling of inexplicable anxiety, of gloomy foreboding.'[201] Her secret mission, her depression and her disappointment in Imlay are the barely spoken foundation of this deeply autobiographical work.[202] Yet, explicit, above the difficulty and the pain, are the present aspects of her journey:

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[197] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 273.
[198] Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 5-6.
[199] Culley, *British Women's Life Writing, 1760-1840*, 8.
[200] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 16.
[201] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 35.
[202] The mission was secret because, as Holmes speculates, the business with the ship was 'Legally speaking […] extremely delicate.' Holmes, 'Introduction', 25.

the geography, the history, and the social and political situation. Within these observations her old obsessions resurface. As might be expected, she writes about women's position and rights in society: not only through observations of the situation of the women she observes but also through personal reflection and recollection, particularly her time in revolutionary France. These personal/political reflections are most poignant when she is writing about her own daughter. She writes:

> You know that as a female I am particularly attached to her—I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. [...] I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit.[203]

We see the personal dilemma of Wollstonecraft the feminist/mother. She wishes an easier life for her daughter than the one she has had, yet the only path she can see without turmoil is for her daughter to subjugate herself.

Wollstonecraft also returns to the topic of reason versus imagination. Another way of coding this is Enlightenment versus Romanticism.[204] Wollstonecraft just missed out on being a leading figure in Romanticism yet many of her ideas and the ideas of her contemporaries would lead to the burgeoning of Romantic ideas. Reason, for Wollstonecraft, was innate (indeed God-given) in women yet it hadn't been allowed to flourish because of a lack of education and patriarchal assumptions about women's intelligence. The term 'imagination' was not, as we understand it today, a tool for fiction: 'imagination', in the Romantic sense, was

[203] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 97.
[204] The Age of Enlightenment is the term for the cultural movement that took place from about 1680 to 1820 in Europe and North America. The focus was on scepticism and reason. Romanticism is the term applied to the literary and artistic movement that took place between 1785 and 1832 in Western Europe. In simple terms, its focus was individuality and emotion.

the process by which a writer recognised the effect of their physical environs on their senses, and, as Taylor writes, 'not merely to reproduce [...] impressions, but to transform them through processes of creative ideation which were seen as the essence of aesthetic genius.'[205] It is in *Letters* that she marries the two ideas in one of her most famous quotes: 'we reason deeply, when we forcibly feel'.[206] Within this quote, Wollstonecraft was able to bridge the two opposing ideas contained in Enlightenment and Romanticism; and demonstrate how they were not only individually important but worked in conjunction with each other. Here Wollstonecraft demonstrates, once again, a non-binary stance. Indeed, it could be said that Wollstonecraft embodies the borders of the binaries between reason and imagination, gender and genre. Later in the same trip, she writes, 'My very reason obliges me to permit my feelings to be my criterion. Whatever excites emotion has charms for me.'[207]

What 'excites emotion', and gives her the most solace, is nature. Contemporary Robert Southey wrote about *Letters*: 'She has made me in love with a cold climate, and frost and snow, with a northern moonlight.'[208] Holmes sees Wollstonecraft's nature writing as evidence of her place within Romantic Literature, comparing her text to Coleridge's *Notebooks* and the *Journals* of Dorothy Wordsworth. He writes, 'she shifts with startling ease from an abstract, sententious, philosophical reflection in the eighteenth-century manner, to a minute and poetically detailed observation of nature.'[209] We also see, for the first time in her writing, how she is now disillusioned with the traditional God she once loved.[210] Instead of a protector, this

[205] Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, 59.
[206] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 171
[207] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 123.
[208] Robert Southey, '213. Robert Southey to Thomas Southey [Brother], 28 April 1797' in *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey. Part One, 1791-1797*, ed. Ian Packer and Lynda Pratt, A Romantic Circles Electronic Edition, first published 2009. Accessed 04 December 2924, https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/arts/research/virtual-bookcase/english/lynda-pratt.aspx.
[209] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 27.
[210] A 1799 opinion from *The Monthly Magazine and American Review* about the timing of Wollstonecraft's loss of faith was: 'We may date her lapse from that dignity of character which distinguished her' to her northern travels when 'she discarded all faith in Christianity'. See: Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984, 331.

God no longer cares about individuals and only cares about species. With lively verbs, she writes about her distress on the state of a humanity abandoned by God: 'Children peep into existence, suffer and die; men play like moths about a candle, and sink into the flame; war, and the "thousand ills which their flesh is heir to," mow them down in shoals.'[211]

Flexner argues that *Letters* 'has a philosophical framework. The author sees individual people as part of the historical process and is concerned with their corporate as well as personal destinies.'[212] Taylor too sees the book as:

> a perfect opportunity to refine her views on human progress by comparing life in Europe's 'most polished' nations to conditions in its 'half-civilised' hinterland: a task she approached with that combination of fact-finding zeal and philosophic presumption so characteristic of Enlightened explorers.[213]

This idea of a 'philosophic framework' holds true, in so much as many frameworks could be claimed for a book which is so wide-ranging. In Letter Seven, for example, through direct speech and personal observations, Wollstonecraft writes about: the King of Denmark; feudal observances; the kindness of the Prince Royal; religion; salt mines; education; and the preserving of bodies. However, even here, the personal resurrects itself, as she ends the letter on this thought: 'Thinking of death makes us cling tenderly to our affections—with more than your usual tenderness, I therefore assure you that I am your's [sic], wishing that the temporary death of absence may not endure longer than is absolutely necessary.'[214]

Clare Tomalin in her biography of Wollstonecraft believes that there was no systematic approach to *Letters* and that Wollstonecraft's view of 'nature, her curiosity about mankind and

[211] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 186.
[212] Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, 220.
[213] Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, 169.
[214] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 109.

her bent towards didacticism run together in oddly successful harmony.' [215] In believing Wollstonecraft had no plan other than to record her thoughts, memories, and feelings whilst noting geography, history and social mores, Tomalin is possibly correct. However, the result led to what Holmes believes is the most imaginative English travel book since Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey. Letters* and Godwin's *Memoir,* Holmes believes, 'mark the shift, as well as anything can, from an eighteenth to nineteenth-century world of feeling. Both bring the inner life of a human being significantly closer to our own experience of it.' He believes the result is revolutionary and continues, 'The novelty of this in cultural terms cannot be overestimated.'[216] Indeed, Wollstonecraft's *Letters,* not only demonstrates the shift in eighteenth century thinking but is also an early example of what would come to be known as 'psychogeography' in the twentieth century.

Psychogeography is, according to Lettrist and Situationist, Guy Debord, 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.'[217] Wollstonecraft does comment on environment and its effect on her. She writes, for example:

> How different was the fresh odour that re-animated me in the avenue [of trees], from the damp chill of the apartments; and as little did the gloomy thoughtfulness excited by the dusty hangings, and worm-eaten pictures, resemble the reveries inspired by the soothing melancholy of their shade.'[218]

In this aspect alone, Wollstonecraft could be said to be engaging in psychogeography. She was influenced by her surroundings which led her to discoveries about place, social history, and

[215] Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 190.
[216] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 17.
[217] Guy Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography' in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 8.
[218] Wollstonecraft and Godwin, *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, 57.

self. However, it is in the style of writing in which Wollstonecraft becomes her most psychogeographical. *Dérive*, proposed by Debord, is the art of drifting: both in walking and in writing. Although Wollstonecraft's journey was (most likely) directed by possible sightings of the ship's captain, her journey seems erratic and without stated purpose. Her writing, too, drifts from landscape, social and political history to autobiographical material. The most famous modern author who writes in this drifting manner is W.G. Sebald who, in each of his books, does something similar to Wollstonecraft.[219] His book, *Rings of Saturn,* subtitled as an 'English Pilgrimage' in the original German text, details the author's journey along the Suffolk coast.[220] Landscape, history, anecdote, and memory are meshed together in what Paul MacInnes, in a review for *The Guardian*, calls 'a triumph of tone; a synchronisation of events, environment and memory with the writer's mood.'[221] This mirrors what Wollstonecraft achieved many centuries earlier.

Ultimately, it was the attraction of this 'synchronisation' of action, place, memory and mood which drew me to use psychogeography for *Inside the Mask*. With its focus on researcher as both subject and object, the narrator's actions within landscapes and the effect it has on them act as the surface below which memory, history and stories submerged, subverted or falsified can be examined. Although Wollstonecraft walked often, she did not take day-long hikes and used this style of writing when she was travelling short distances and was stationary within her rooms, yet the use of psychogeographical techniques remains throughout. During Covid restrictions, this idea of 'stationary' psychogeography became part of my working practice. This will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

[219] Although Sebald never used the term 'psychogeographer' to describe himself, I argue in Chapter Four that it is precisely in this manner that he writes.
[220] W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Harvill Press, 1998).
[221] Paul MacInnes, 'The Rings of Saturn by WG Sebald – Walking through History', *The Guardian*, 13 August 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/aug/13/the-rings-of-saturn-by-wg-sebald-walking-through-history.

I also found another inspiration through Wollstonecraft. In each iteration, her texts express the implicit and explicit desire for physical freedom and freedom of political thought, unavailable to women at the time. Although Bensley's wives lived centuries after Wollstonecraft, they were denied the right to vote and would suffer disapprobation as unmarried mothers. Uneducated and poor, they had no voice. Through my creative nonfiction, I aimed to give Bensley's wives the platform Wollstonecraft worked so hard to achieve. I wished to engender in the reader the empathy that was denied to Wollstonecraft. Throughout her work, Wollstonecraft argues for the imagination as a source for reason. In *Inside the Mask*, the narrator's imagination was used as a research tool by which reasons for Bensley's and his wives' behaviour could be explored and explained. At the same time, I wanted to express how imagination without empathy—that is, Bensley's fraudulent stories—could deny 'reason' and lead others to a false understanding of the situation. Ultimately, I wished to demonstrate imagination's power for good and bad and explore how we all occupy the space between the brutality of the real world and the excitement and dream state of the stories we create for ourselves and others.

Chapter 3: The 'Worst Mother in Britain': authorial responsibilities, gendered expectations, and ghosts in Myerson's *The Lost Child* and *Nonfiction: A Novel*.

Popular critical reception to Julie Myerson's 2009 biography/memoir *The Lost Child* was damning. The public and her son objected to the inclusion of details about her son's addiction to skunk cannabis. The book was mentioned in the House of Commons and Myerson was pilloried as 'the worst mother in Britain.'[222] My use of memoir in *Inside the Mask* also necessitated including uncomfortable details about members of my family. Using close reading of *The Lost Child* and Myerson's 2022 book *Nonfiction: A Novel,* this chapter will discuss the ethical responsibilities of the author when using family details; sexist expectations placed upon the female author/mother; and the permeable boundaries of auto/bio/fiction.

Similar to *Inside the Mask, Mary: A Fiction,* and *Letters Written During a Short Residency in Sweden, Norway and Denmark,* a prevalent theme within Myerson's oeuvre is the way the past influences the present. In *The Lost Child*, Myerson interweaves the narrative of her troubled relationship with her son alongside her research into Victorian watercolourist Mary Yelloly, who died at the age of twenty-one of tuberculosis. Myerson's latest book

[222] Debated in the House of Commons: 'House of Commons Hansard Debates for 11 Mar 2009 (Pt 0017)', accessed 10 August 2023, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090311/debtext/90311-0017.htm. For when Myerson claims she was called the 'worst mother in Britain' see: 'Interview: Julie Myerson Was Pilloried for Writing about Her Son's Battle with Addiction but the Fallout Made Her Fearless', The Scotsman, 6 August 2011, https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/books/interview-julie-myerson-was-pilloried-for-writing-about-her-sons-battle-with-addiction-but-the-fallout-made-her-fearless-2461580. However, I can only find secondary sources for Myerson's claim which leads me to believe it is apocryphal. The Times did report that the publication was 'a betrayal of motherhood itself.' See: Minette Marin, 'Her son was betrayed because she's a writer first, mother second', *The Times,* 8 March 2009. https://www.thetimes.com/article/her-son-was-betrayed-because-shes-a-writer-first-mother-second-5c6hm76m22q.

Nonfiction: A Novel revisits the issues in *The Lost Child* through an auto/fictional lens and contains the theme of the past 'haunting' the present.

Julie Myerson is the author of eleven novels and four nonfiction books. She is also a prolific columnist, reviewer, and appeared regularly as a panellist on BBC Two's 'Newsnight Review' from 2001 to 2009. Much of her writing is autobiographical and she details difficult relationships with her children, parents and lovers. Although the majority of her books use her real-life experiences, because *The Lost Child* was billed as a memoir and included what Kate Kellaway in the *Observer* called, 'courageous' and 'rash' details about her son's addiction issues, this publication was highly controversial.[223] There were questions about the morality of the book in the House of Commons,[224] and she was also lambasted by Jeremy Paxman in a notorious 'Newsnight' interview. He insisted she'd ruined her son's life: not through how she behaved with her actions of 'tough love' but through the decision to publish.[225] Jake Myerson was of the same opinion. He stated in the *Daily Mail,* 'In the book she has taken the very worst years of my life and cleverly blended it into a work of art, and that to me is obscene.'[226]

Integral to this controversy was that the publication of *The Lost Child* coincided with the revelation that Julie Myerson was the anonymous author of a *Guardian* column titled 'Living with Teenagers.'[227] This was a no-holds barred account of family life in which Myerson's three teenagers were shown to be unruly and unreasonable. For Myerson's critics,

[223] Kate Kellaway, 'A Potent Dose of Mother Courage', *The Observer*, 15 March 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/15/lost-child-julie-myerson.
[224] 'House of Commons Hansard Debates for 11 Mar 2009 (Pt 0017)', Parliament of the United Kingdom, accessed 10 August 2023, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090311/debtext/90311-0017.htm.
[225] Julie Myerson, 'Julie Myerson Son's Drug Abuse Interview', interview by Jeremy Paxman, Dailymotion, posted 12 June 2015, https://www.dailymotion.com/EnidNye.
[226] Tom Rawstone, '"My Big Mouth Mum Was Right - Drugs DID Ruin My Life"', Daily Mail Online, 4 September 2010, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1308898/My-big-mouth-mum-right--drugs-DID-ruin-life-Julie-Myersons-son-18-months-thrown-home.html.
[227] All the columns have been taken off *The Guardian* website and cannot be found online in any form. However, Myerson did anonymously publish a collection of these columns in a book of the same name. Julie Myerson, *Living with Teenagers* (London: Headline Review, 2008). This, too, was difficult to source and eventually a copy was discovered in City of London University Library, where Myerson has taught.

the fact that she was the author of 'Living with Teenagers' and *The Lost Child* made the publication of the latter a much more serious error of judgement. One commenter on *Mumsnet*, when the authorship of 'Living with Teenagers' was still in question, said:

> reading "The Lost Child" with the knowledge that [Myerson] may be the author of LWT ['Living with Teenagers'] TOTALLY changes the way you experience the "truth" of that book. As a "one-off" cathartic expose of a family's struggle with a drug-taking son, it obviously raises enough hackles judging by this thread. But off the back of MANY years of writing about her children and earning her living from laying bare their teenage tantrums and misdemeanours […] leaves her in am [sic] extremely dodgy position.[228]

According to Jake Myerson, he asked his mother twice if the column was written by her and she denied it, even, he said in his 'addict' interview, going so far as to make up a story about an underhand journalist who was stealing stories from their family.[229] However, the column did end in June 2008, a year before the publication of *The Lost Child*, when the anonymous author revealed one of her children had found out and confronted her. She wrote in *The Guardian*, 'There was one thing I'd always been clear on: as soon as the kids found out, I would stop. Immediately. No questions asked.'[230] One of her reasons for stopping were that as the children had grown, they had become more vulnerable and so 'the column began to feel less like some kind of benign, semi-comic revenge and more like a betrayal.'[231] Myerson's

[228] 'Julie Myerson - Why Am I Not Surprised That a Book Has Materialised Concerning Her Own Son's Drug Issues?', Mumsnet, 1 February 2009, https://www.mumsnet.com/talk/what_were_reading/713727-Julie-Myerson-why-am-I-not-surprised-that-a-book.
[229] Helen Weathers, '"You're the Addict, Mum!"'. Daily Mail Online. 12 March 2009. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1161332/Youre-addict-mum-Son-Julie-Myerson-says-shes-hooked-exploiting-children.html.
[230] Again, no direct reference is available as columns were taken down from *The Guardian*, but this was reported in the *Daily Mail*. See: Helen Weathers, '"You're the Addict, Mum!"'.
[231] Becky Gardiner, 'Living with the Myersons', *The Guardian*, 10 March 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/mar/10/family-julie-myerson.

phrase ‘benign, semi-comic revenge’ speaks to the feeling of powerlessness that parents of teenagers sometimes have. Parenting options to enact this ‘revenge’ usually focus on, for example, the setting of boundaries, confiscating electronic items, and venting to family and friends. Myerson chose to write her ‘revenge’ seemingly unaware that this could be seen as a betrayal in itself, no matter how old the children were. She then went one step further in *The Lost Child* and wrote about the more serious issue of her son’s drug addiction and resulting violence.

After her identity as the writer of ‘Living with Teenagers’ was revealed, Julie Myerson released a statement through her publishers saying, ‘To me *Living with Teenagers* and *The Lost Child* are very different things: one a collection of affectionate vignettes that I hoped would strike a chord with many parents, and the other a serious description of what happens when skunk cannabis bursts into a home.’[232] She reiterated this defence in her ‘Newsnight’ interview saying she wanted to help other families with drug-addicted children.[233] Her husband, Jonathan Myerson added, in another article for *The Guardian*:

> This is cannabis. It stops you, it rips out normal reactions, normal kindness, normal motivation. […] And this is why we have broken one of the most serious prohibitions facing any writer: You Do Not Write About Your Children. […] So if anyone is going to write the inside story, to bring out the truth of this, it is going to be a parent.[234]

Jake Myerson disbelieved his father’s motives stating that his parents were addicted to writing about him and his siblings. In one of his three interviews for the *Daily Mail*, he stated, ‘They

[232] Gardiner, ‘Living with the Myersons’.
[233] Myerson, ‘Julie Myerson Son’s Drug Abuse Interview’.
[234] Jonathan Myerson, ‘This Is an Emergency’, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2009/mar/10/cannabis-drug-abuse.

are trying to suggest that they published *The Lost Child* with such innocence, to help other families, to save other children—treating me like I'm some kind of holy sacrifice. But they've done all this before. It's just another betrayal.'[235]

Julie Myerson could have chosen to write this story in many ways: as a factual textbook, an op ed, a blog post etc. These examples may not have caused such a furore: not only because their reach might have been less but because they would have concentrated on the issue and suggested possible solutions or, at least, places to contact. However, experienced writers know how to manipulate story for the highest impact. Although Myerson couldn't have predicted the media storm created by *The Lost Child,* she did perhaps understand that her way of writing would garner the most interest and was, therefore, the most successful way of getting the message across. In her Paxman interview she said, 'Someone has to talk about this in a way that moves people.' [236] This corresponds with Rita Felski's notion, in her book *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics,* that the confessional text is 'used as a springboard by readers from which to examine and compare their own experiences', and 'the representative aspects of the author's experience' are what drives both the narrative and reception.[237]

Myerson, therefore, chose to write the book as a memoir (or, in the *Daily Mail's* words, a, 'gruesomely compelling real-life soap opera.')[238] She also decided that the text would contain another narrative thread. Echoing Wollstonecraft's preface to *Letters* and her assertion that she found it impossible to rid her text of personal drama, Myerson's foreword states that she wished to write a book about a young Victorian artist, Mary Yelloly, but because 'something painful was happening at home [with her eldest child she] gave in and let the two strands weave together on the page.'[239] This paints the writer as helpless against her art: that

[235] Weathers, '"You're the Addict, Mum!"'.
[236] Myerson, 'Julie Myerson Son's Drug Abuse Interview'.
[237] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 93-4.
[238] Rawstone, '"My Big Mouth Mum Was Right"'.
[239] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, i.

she had no choice but to write it. Yet we know that this isn't true: a choice was made by herself, her husband, and her publishers. A suspicion forms that the Mary Yelloly story, which Myerson was commissioned to write, was not quite compelling enough to move the reader through the long-form text.[240] Although Mary Yelloly's death, and those of her siblings, was tragic for the family, there is little narrative pull as the main character died young and so did not leave much behind in terms of biographical material. The Yelloly parts of the book consist of some archive research, site visits and conversations with Yelloly's predecessors which, although interesting and well-written, do not demonstrate Myerson's preferred style. Myerson, as will be discussed later, most often uses dark and dramatic plots. Perhaps, a cynic might think, the Jake Myerson storyline was used to bolster the Mary Yelloly plot within *The Lost Child* and provide Julie Myerson with her preferred dramatic narrative. The fact that Myerson writes in blocks, switching between her home life and her research into Mary Yelloly, could consolidate this point of view: guiding the reader to believe that Myerson inserted her homelife into the text after finding the Yelloly story was not as interesting as she would have liked. This view could have led to what Mark Lawson describes as the 'parody imposed on Myerson by commentators: a cold-blooded attempt to turn her son into money.'[241]

As a rebuttal to the notion that Myerson simply inserted the 'son' storyline into her text, it is important to note that blocks of narrative which switch through time, plot, and place are common to Myerson's writing style—most clearly seen in her 2016 novel, *The Stopped Heart,* which jumps between past and present. It can also be argued that the insertion of the Mary Yelloly story acts in favour of Myerson's message about the danger of drug use. In using historical detail (and anonymising her children),[242] she, according to Lawson, 'attempts to

[240] Mark Lawson states it was a commission. See: Mark Lawson, 'Mother Courage', *The Guardian,* 14 March 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/14/julie-myerson-lost-child-review.
[241] Lawson, 'Mother Courage'.
[242] Jake Myerson is only referred to as 'the boy' or 'our son'.

avoid the language and structure of a tabloid confessional'.[243] The Yelloly story, like my Bensley thread, also allows for mirroring, reflection and authority. Myerson chooses to begin Chapter One with what could be read as a piece of historical fiction with an omniscient narrator who is absent as a character—there isn't a single 'I' in this passage. In this section, the narrator directs the reader. Firstly, she gives us a place and date—'SUFFOLK, JUNE 1838'—then she places the reader in a field—'Cow parsley as high as your shoulder.' She uses imperatives—'Look again… Go a little closer. Zoom right in.'[244] Quite clearly, the author is in control at this point. The reader is being told, not asked, what to do. If the reader is to continue, they are agreeing to obey the narrator's directions, that is, place themselves in a position of submission. From the outset, Myerson is asking the reader to trust her. Not only trust that what she is showing us helps the reader understand the poignancy of the historical situation, but that the historical situation parallels, in some way, the author's life: the reader has, after all, been told on the back cover that this is 'an aching, empty-nest memoir.'[245] The reader, therefore, perceives that Myerson has chosen to start with historical fiction to lay clues as to the central issue in her memoir. When the reader is asked to look upon Mary Yelloly's coffin,[246] they may recall lines from the foreword: 'Our eldest child – previously bright and sweet and happy – was drifting further and further away from us. We seemed to be losing him.'[247] The reader isn't aware how bright and talented Mary Yelloly was at this point, yet they are told she was twenty-one when she died. In short, the reader is being asked to think about the loss of Mary alongside the loss of the narrator's son. This is compounded on page 8, where Myerson writes, 'My heart turned over. She died. You died.'[248] Although the use of the pronoun here could be referring to

[243] Lawson, 'Mother Courage'.
[244] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 1.
[245] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, back cover.
[246] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 2.
[247] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, i.
[248] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 8.

Yelloly herself, the reader suspects it might be her son whom she also sometimes refers to as 'you.'[249]

This authorial tone changes in the second section of her first chapter. Myerson writes about driving to Mary Yelloly's grave in February 2006 'only days – or is it weeks – after we've had to lock our eldest child out of our home.'[250] She says that Mary Yelloly's short life 'suddenly feels urgent to me: something I must uncover and make sense of. Why? Don't ask me why. I am still trying to work out why.'[251] In this Myerson is overtly placing the question 'Why?' in the mouth of the reader. When she claims not to know why she is interested in Mary Yelloly, she is giving the reader a higher status than the narrator because the reader knows exactly why: the narrator is interested in the death of a young Victorian woman because she is losing her son.

In her book about the pleasures and dangers of creative nonfiction and the role of the wandering reporter, *The Situation and The Story*, Vivian Gornick writes, 'when one makes a romance out of not knowing, the reliable reporter is in danger of becoming an untrustworthy narrator.'[252] However, in *The Lost Child* unknowing is an important thematic and structural technique. In stark contrast to Myerson's authority in the Yelloly thread, authorial control dissipates in the son sections. The narrator cannot predict her son's behaviour and is confused about times and dates. Because she has positioned herself as authoritative with Yelloly, the reader perceives the narrator as a normally reliable person under high levels of stress. Trust is also fostered as, although the narrator has positioned herself as a respected researcher and authoritative writer, she is also willing (or is overwhelmed and compelled enough) to

[249] Myerson's use of the second person is extremely common. In *The Lost Child* she uses it to refer to Yelloly, her son, and her husband. She also uses it in *Nonfiction* to denote the daughter. This, as Hephzibah Anderson points out, means that 'the reader can't help but feel somehow implicated.' Hephzibah Anderson, 'Nonfiction by Julie Myerson Review – Fact into Incandescent Fiction', *The Observer*, 22 May 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/may/22/nonfiction-by-julie-myerson-review-fact-into-incandescent-fiction.
[250] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 2.
[251] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 2.
[252] Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and The Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2001), 11.

demonstrate confusion and fear in her home life. The juxtaposition of narratives allows the reader to be both present inside the narrator's head and an outsider, learning and understanding about two tragedies separated by time.

By the end of the text, Yelloly's ghost tells the narrator, 'People do know things. The way you know about me.'[253] Permission has been given for the telling of the story. Things are much more complicated in the son thread. Permission, as can be seen from the controversy and even the afterword of the book, is unclear.[254] In the Yelloly thread, the tragedy is simple: a young artist died of consumption. In the son thread, things are much more complicated. Whose tragedy is it? The mother's, the son's, or the family's? Whose fault is it? Drugs, the son, or the mother? Myerson does not ask for sympathy and, indeed, is hard on herself in lines such as 'No parent rejects a child in this way without feeling they've failed in the very darkest way possible'[255] and 'What did we do to him?'[256] These questions, asked to self, give an understanding of an internal self in turmoil. It is difficult not to empathise having been given the understanding that, for Myerson, it is as though her child, like Mary Yelloly, has died.

The inclusion of the Mary Yelloly story is also used to demonstrate how drugs disrupt a whole family not just the user. Talking to her son, the narrator says, 'Don't worry, it's not so much about you – or at least it is – but it's more about me really. A mother's story.'[257] Her dedication also makes clear that Myerson is telling *her* version of what happened: 'For him: he knows who he is and I love him.' At this stage of reading, it is unclear who the 'he' is (we discover that it is her son) but already implicit is that Myerson is not claiming to tell another's story from their point of view—as he alone 'knows who he is'—but is attempting to tell, with

[253] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 311.
[254] Told about the existence of the manuscript, the son says, 'My whole life story's in this fucking book?'. Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 317. After reading the manuscript and making suggestions as to changes, he says, 'So don't you go thinking I approve of what you've done.' Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 320.
[255] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 9.
[256] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 320.
[257] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 317.

love, the story of what happened. In Jennifer Cooke's *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing,* she writes how Alison Bechdel, Sheila Heti, and Kate Zambreno, 'place the authorship of themselves as women at the heart of their projects laying bear the making of a writer and her work.'[258] *The Lost Child* is Julie Myerson's story in which both Mary Yelloly and her son played a crucial part.

Historically, as can be seen through Margery Kempe's *Book* and the reception of Godwin's *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft, and in the present day, as can be seen by reception of *The Lost Child*, society does not easily separate the roles of author, narrator, and mother. Referring to childbirth memoir, Ruth Quiney in her paper on 'Twenty-First-Century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma' contends that the very fact that the 'literature of traumaculture' is written by women invokes in the general public 'intense cultural anxiety about the capacities of women: the state of modern mothers that […] becomes troublingly analogous to that of the body politic as a whole.'[259] Micheal Greenberg published his book about his daughter's descent into psychosis, *Hurry Down Sunshine*, in September 2008, around the same time *The Lost Child* was published. Jane Shilling, comparing the two in *The Telegraph,* writes 'no critic seems to have questioned her father's right to appropriate his daughter's narrative.'[260] Recognising that the lack of questioning might have been because the daughter did not complain about the publication, Shilling nevertheless concludes that 'This is perhaps because Greenberg's critics acknowledge – as Myerson's apparently cannot – that the experiences of parenthood and childhood are not separable. One cannot describe one without implicating the other.'[261] This echoes the words of Laura Marcus in her book *Auto/Biographical Discourses* when she argues

[258] Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing,* 65.
[259] Ruth Quiney, 'Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother: Twenty-First-Century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma', *Women: A Cultural Review* 18, no. 1 (1 April 2007): 19–40, 22.
[260] Jane Shilling, 'The Lost Child by Julie Myerson - Review', *The Telegraph,* 12 March 2009. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/4978453/The-Lost-Child-by-Julie-Myerson-review.html.
[261] Shilling, 'The Lost Child by Julie Myerson - Review'.

that feminism had a determining role in bringing about the recognition that 'recounting one's own life almost inevitably entails writing the life of another or others; [and] writing the life of another surely entail the biographers' identifications with his or her subject whether these are made explicit or not.'[262] In an interview for *The New York Times*, Michael Greenburg pinpoints why he may have had a better reception than Myerson when writing about a child: '"I do think that a mother is a very ripe target," said Mr Greenberg, […] "I felt [the reception to *The Lost Child*] was very predatory."'[263]

Rachel Cusk, after reading negative reviews of her memoir about motherhood, *A Life's Work*, wrote in *The Guardian* that she 'was instantly overcome by powerful feelings of guilt and shame'. She writes,

> There is always shame in the creation of an object for the public gaze. This time, however, I felt it not as a writer but as a mother. I felt that I had committed a violent act. I felt that I had been abusive and negligent. I felt these things not because of anything I had physically or actually done to them […] but because I had written a book that had malfunctioned, and had allowed our relationship to be publicly impugned. [264]

The use of 'malfunctioned' here refers to a particular instance in the book which led a reviewer to believe she locked her child in the kitchen.[265] However, according to Cusk, this was only one of many negative reviews which called her 'a self-obsessed bore: the embodiment of the

[262] Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 273-4.
[263] Patricia Cohen, 'A Mother's Memoir, a Son's Anguish', *The New York Times*, 30 August 2009. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/31/books/31myerson.html.
[264] Rachel Cusk, 'I Was Only Being Honest', *The Guardian*, 21 March 2008. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/21/biography.women.
[265] The quote is, '[The reader] went on to accuse me of "confining [my daughter] to the kitchen like an animal". […] How did this person presume to know what I did with my daughter, and where? Where had she come upon such bizarre information? Had someone told her I treated my child like an animal? It took me a long time to realise that her accusation came from the book itself, from a falsification of its personal material.' Cusk, 'I Was Only Being Honest'.

Me! Me! Me! attitude which you so resent in small children,' and the text 'pure misery to read.'[266] Clare Hanson and Kay Boyle in their paper on *Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity*, believes these reactions to the book, demonstrate (as they do in the Myerson controversy), 'the contested nature of motherhood in a post-feminist society in which it is presented on the one hand as a "choice" and on the other as a responsibility'.[267] Women are expected to have children and, when they have done so, not complain about the gendered responsibility divide nor the implicit difficulties of being a mother because it was their 'choice'. And, it seems, it was mothers themselves who had the greatest role in dismissing Cusk's alternative story of motherhood. In her *Guardian* article, Cusk reports that, 'Again and again people judged the book not as readers but as mothers, and it was judgment of a sanctimoniousness whose like I had never experienced.'[268] It could be they were punishing her for not conforming to the role of what Ruth Quiney terms as, 'the hegemonic mother, the cheery suburban matron utterly devoted to her brood of productive future citizens.'[269]

Cusk also points to a conflict between the writerly self and motherly self. In *A Life's Work*, she writes, 'To succeed in being one means to fail at being the other'[270] referring to the mental clarity and peace one needs to write. As Alison Bechdel writes in *Are You My Mother?* 'You can't live and write at the same time.'[271] Like my narrator in *Inside the Mask*, Cusk's desire to write is thwarted by responsibilities. She 'become[s] an undone task, a phone call I can't seem to make, a bill I don't get around to paying. My life has the seething atmosphere of an untended garden.'[272] Danielle Price in an article for *Literary Mama* argues this use of

[266] Cusk, 'I Was Only Being Honest'. Although Cusk cites these reviews in *The Guardian* article, they are hard to locate. One might presume they were either said orally or were reactions on message boards and the like.
[267] Clare Hanson, 'The Book of Repetition: Rachel Cusk and Maternal Subjectivity', *E-Rea. Revue Électronique d'études Sur Le Monde Anglophone*, no. 10.2 (18 June 2013), 1.
[268] Cusk, 'I Was Only Being Honest'.
[269] Quiney, 'Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother', 23.
[270] Rachel Cusk, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 57.
[271] Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), 7.
[272] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 133.

metaphor is an integral part of what Cusk, like Myerson, is attempting to do.[273] In terms of whether Cusk can be a mother *and* write is answered by the quality of the literature. Maureen Freely, in an article for the *Independent* on Cusk states, 'Although it's a true story, it's very much a novelist's book, stark and sculpted and full of ambiguous shadows.'[274]

Understanding that her own maternal memoir *Making Babies* demonstrated the conflict in how mothers *should* behave and the role of the writer to tell the truth, Anne Enright, begins her text in an act of *humilitas* like Margery Kempe: 'Speech is a selfish act, and mothers should probably remain silent… So I'd like to say sorry to everyone in advance. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.'[275] Enright then says, 'my only excuse is that I think it is important. I wanted to say what it was like.'[276] This statement can be read in two ways: both of which might simultaneously be true. Enright could believe in the importance of the truth for the readers, so that they might feel seen in the messy, tricky business of mothering; and/or Enright could be saying it was important for her, as the author, to tell her truth. In *Recollections of my Non-Existence,* Rebecca Solnit, elaborates on this truth-telling aspect of the writer's craft:

> you write from who you are and what you care about and what true voice is yours and from leaving all the false voices and wrong notes behind, and so underneath the task of writing a particular piece is the general one of making a self who can make the work you are meant to make.[277]

This view, of a self, created by writing, comes up against opposition when writing about one's experience of motherhood because, as Ruth Quiney states, 'the suffering and crises of

[273] Danielle Price, 'Mother Luck: A Review of A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother and The Lucky Ones', Literary Mama, 26 June 2021, https://literarymama.com/articles/departments/2005/02/mother-luck.
[274] Maureen Freely, 'Rachel Cusk: The Myth of Motherhood', *The Independent*, 5 September 2001, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/rachel-cusk-the-myth-of-motherhood-9143257.
[275] Anne Enright, *Making Babies* (London: Vintage, 2004), 1.
[276] Enright, *Making Babies*, 4.
[277] Rebecca Solnit, *Recollections of My Nonexistence* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 122.

subjective identification to which the writing bears witness paradoxically confirm the continuing inscription of the mother as epitome of private, sacrificial femininity, oppositional to the cleanly bounded, productive post-Enlightenment subject.'[278] In other words, when writing about motherhood, one is condemned for the very act of self-reflection and assertion because it goes against society's preferred view of the mother as 'private' and 'sacrificial'.

It is this issue of the conflict between the motherhood role and the writer role which caused the most controversy in the reception of *The Lost Child*. Not only was Myerson giving her home-life and her writing subject equal stakes in the narrative, but that, as a writer (particularly one who is published and respected), she had more power than her subjects, particularly her son. Jake Myerson said about his parents in his 'addict' interview, 'They are writers, they are published, they have a voice. I don't.'[279] As Clare Lynch writes in her chapter in *Research Methodologies for Auto/biography Studies*, 'The disproportionate power of the "I" in memoir forces the author into ethical challenges at every turn.'[280] According to Myerson's critics, she failed to navigate these challenges. She chose to use her power as a writer and disregard the 'private' and 'sacrificial' aspect of motherhood. Lynch writes that 'the most obvious solution to [the power imbalance] is to redistribute power by offering a right of reply, or even the right to veto'[281] and, although disputed by Jake Myerson, his parents claimed that they did take his opinion into account. As discussed earlier, in the afterword of *The Lost Child*,[282] Myerson writes how 'our boy' gave permission for the publication after recommending a few small changes which she made. Johnathan Myerson also wrote in his article for *The Guardian* how 'I told [Julie] it was only publishable if our boy agreed.'[283] Julie

[278] Quiney, 'Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother'.
[279] Weathers, "You're the Addict, Mum!".
[280] Clare Lynch "Writing Memoir" in *Research Methodologies for Auto/Biography Studies*, ed. Kate Douglas and Ashley Barnwell (Milton, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 14.
[281] Lynch, "Writing Memoir", 15.
[282] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 317-8.
[283] Myerson, 'This Is an Emergency.'

Myerson even included some of Jake's poems in the book with his permission. However, as Paxman pointed out in his interview, if Jake were a drug addict, then he couldn't make a rational decision on the book, nor should she have paid him for his poems.[284] It seems that even when permission is given, writing about family will cause upset. Although not publicly lambasted for writing autobiographically, Lynch reports that Knausgaard often expresses regret in interviews because he believes his work has damaged relationships and caused his subjects harm.[285] And in an interview following publication of *Are You My Mother?* Bechdel admitted it was 'in many ways a huge violation of my family.'[286] Myerson had no such qualms. *The Guardian* reports her as saying, 'I don't regret the book ... but I may live to regret saying that.'[287]

In one of Jake Myerson's *Daily Mail* interviews, he said that he believed that his mother would never write about her family again—'She is not that stupid. She knows what she could lose. It would just be such a trespass for it to be done again.'[288] However, in 2022, Myerson chose to publish *Nonfiction: A Novel.* This text works through four narrative strands which concentrate on the narrator's relationships with her drug-addicted child, difficult parents, her lover, her husband, and a student. They are structured in small sections of past and present events. This construction mimics the narrator's sense of confusion with time, evident within the novel: 'Though whenever your father and I try to put an order on these things, we seem to lose all grip on chronology.'[289] Alongside memories, her daily life is recounted as well as incidents at book festivals and the like in which she discusses her practice as an author. Although purportedly fiction, the use of such a title, plus the inclusion of almost identical details from *The Lost Child* (and from Jake Myerson's interviews) demonstrates that Myerson

[284] The latter point she agreed with saying they never usually gave him cash.
[285] Douglas and Barnwell, *Research Methodologies for Auto/Biography Studies*, 17.
[286] Hillary L. Chute, *Outside the Box – Interviews with Contemporary Cartoonists* (Chicago London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 162.
[287] Jamie Doward, '"I Don't Regret Writing about My Lost Child"', *The Guardian*, 8 March 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2009/mar/08/drugs-and-alcohol.
[288] Rawstone, '"My Big Mouth Mum Was Right"'.
[289] Julie Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel* (London: Corsair, 2022), 148.

had chosen, once more, to delve into her own personal history, which necessarily included details of family life.

In using the title *Nonfiction: A Novel,* as in Wollstonecraft's *Mary: A Fiction,* the ambiguity of whether the text is fact or fiction is flagged at the outset. We do not know which of the titles to believe. 'Nonfiction' occupies first place, yet the word 'novel' is mentioned in four out of the six reviews on the back cover. Playing with auto/fiction boundaries is a key signifier in 'new audacity' works, as discussed in Chapter One and Two. For example, Sheila Heti's text, *How Should a Person Be?,* was originally subtitled, 'a novel from life.'[290] Heti adds to the confusion by using people's real names, descriptions of real works of art by her friends, and real emails and transcripts of speech. Although Myerson avoids real names, intertextuality in the form of *The Lost Child*, other Myerson novels, and newspaper reports, adds to the inconclusiveness about how this work should be read. In fact, the differences between her real life and imagined life are fewer than the similarities. In *Nonfiction,* the troubled teenager is a female only child; and the narrator has a brother, rather than two sisters as Myerson does. Otherwise, the details of the narrator's life are remarkably similar to Myerson's. *Nonfiction*'s narrator is a female middle-aged author. And, just as 'our boy' in *The Lost Child* 'says that [his parents'] standards are ludicrous, restrictive, monomaniacal, middle-aged and middle class',[291] the narrator's mother in *Nonfiction*, writes in an email that the narrator's child 'can't seem to conform to your intellectual and high-achieving standards.'[292] In both texts, the narrators write of a traumatic night in their childhood. In *Nonfiction,* their mother told the narrator and her siblings they were going on a summer holiday but, in reality, they were moving house to 'a part of a city he [the narrator's father] won't think of looking for us.'[293] In *The Lost Child,* this is described as 'A secret address, a house in the red-light district of town which she'd bought

[290] Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing*, 2020, 69.
[291] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 69.
[292] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 31.
[293] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A* Novel, 133.

and done up on the quiet.'[294] Other similarities include fathers who committed suicide and difficult relationships with partners sometime in the past. All the above is evidence that the text could be termed 'autofiction' or at least that modern-day interpretation of autofiction, as discussed in Chapter Two, in which the author uses events from their real life and changes aspects in order for a deeper psychological truth to be shown.

One of the main narrative strands in *Nonfiction* is a troubled relationship the narrator has with her drug-addicted child. This daughter is as violent as 'our boy' in *The Lost Child* and shoves the narrator 'so hard against the double doors in the hall that my hand goes through the glass and I slice my wrist open.'[295] Throughout *Nonfiction,* the narrator also demonstrates the same guilt she felt in *The Lost Child.* After the parents send their daughter to a rehabilitation unit, the mother feels, 'hemmed in, on edge, angry and defiant, my whole body tense and defended, as if I have been accused of something.//Perhaps I have been accused of something.'[296] The narrator, like the narrator in *The Lost Child,* finds it difficult to forgive herself and refuses to go to therapy because 'I don't know who I am without my most unforgiving and self-lacerating thoughts.'[297]

In *The Lost Child,* the drug was skunk cannabis; in *Nonfiction* it is heroin. However, Jake Myerson did use heroin and his admittance to A&E sounds almost identical to an event the daughter underwent in *Nonfiction.* In a *Daily Mail* article Jake 'confessed what he'd done', which was overdosed, and his parents hurried to the hospital, where he'd been given charcoal to halt the damaging effects of the drugs.[298] In *Nonfiction*, the narrator rushes to her daughter's bedside in hospital to find 'Black crumbs still clinging to your lips where they had to force the

[294] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 97.
[295] In *The Lost Child,* a similar pattern of words is used to describe an incident in which the narrator reports how her son 'hit me so hard on the side of my head that I'll find myself in A&E with a perforated eardrum.' Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 37.
[296] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 6.
[297] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 22.
[298] Rawstone, '"My Big Mouth Mum Was Right"'.

charcoal down your throat'.[299] Indeed, the resemblance of the fictional daughter to Jake Myerson is so strong, it is hard to view her immediately as a girl. On page 95, she slouches, wears parkas, has a wallet, and, on page 4, she carries a guitar just as Myerson's son in *The Lost Child* had done. The narrator uses the second person to address her child so when she mentions 'breasts' in *Nonfiction* on page five it comes as a shock to discover the child is female. Myerson continues to use a very light touch to show her character's female nature. Aside from a mention of mascara on page 175, references to the narrator's daughter's gender focus on the sexual abuse the character suffers because of her addiction: 'You tell me that for a while you let anyone do anything to your body.'[300] It is as if Myerson is asking herself how her real-life situation could be worse. And answering: if I'd had a daughter with the same problems, she would be even less safe than a son. Similarly, by stripping the daughter of siblings, it seems that Myerson is also exploring possibilities. In *The Lost Child*, the narrator wonders: 'If we had just one child, if he were the only one living at home, we'd surely try and stick this out, we'd tough it out?'[301] The answer she reaches seems to justify her actions in real life, which is, even if it were one child, and even if that child were a daughter, the mother still would have had to throw the child out of the house because of their behaviour.

In an article for the *Spectator*,[302] Alex Peake-Tomlinson reports that Myerson's friend calls her books 'Dead Babies Books', demonstrating how Myerson often uses children's deaths as a theme or culmination of a plot line.[303] It is as though Myerson imagines the worse thing

[299] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 230. This image also appears in *The Stopped Heart* in relation to the father's daughter's overdose: 'They tried to make her vomit but it didn't work. They gave her charcoal.' See: Myerson, *The Stopped Heart*, 224. And 'It was horrible, you know,' he says at last. 'Seeing her lying there in A&E. Her mouth was all black from the stuff they gave her.' See: Myerson, *The Stopped Heart*, 263.
[300] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 37.
[301] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 9.
[302] Alex Peake-Tomkinson, 'Too Close to Home: Nonfiction, by Julie Myerson, Reviewed', *The Spectator*, 1 June 2022, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/too-close-to-home-nonfiction-by-julie-myerson-reviewed/.
[303] In *The Stopped Heart*, the modern-day couple have lost two daughters to a paedophile murderer. The parallel historical storyline is of a predator who grooms a young girl and murders all the village school children a hundred and fifty years earlier. *Something Might Happen* starts with a murder of a young mother and ends with the death of her friend's daughter.

possible for affluent middle-class families and is not afraid to delve into the worst fears of the readers. Ramping up the tension in *Nonfiction,* therefore, seems not so much a way to obfuscate truth but a writerly decision. Indeed, within the text, the narrator criticises her student's work because 'Not one conversation contains a single moment of controversy or tension, and the one time something bad seems to be about to happen, someone else conveniently steps in and sorts it out.'[304] As in all her fiction, in *Nonfiction* Myerson leans into worst-case scenarios and the fictional aspects are used to show terrible possibilities. The 'what-ifs' multiply. What if the narrator's father not only died from suicide but the mother was a narcissist who favoured the narrator's sibling? What if the narrator not only had difficulties with her husband but had an affair with an untrustworthy married man? What if the narrator's husband was also unfaithful resulting in a child with another woman? And, finally, what if I imply the drug-addicted child dies? In exploring these questions, Myerson, like Wollstonecraft in *Mary: A Fiction,* investigates how a character who is so similar to the author to be almost indistinguishable would react given different (and, in Myerson's case, more dramatic) circumstances.

In *The Lost Child*, when speaking to her son about why she had written the book, the narrator tells him, 'But you see, I had to write it. It was the only thing I could possibly write.' Her son responds, 'I know that, he says, quietly. I understand about writing.'[305] The implication here is that writing is personal and traumatic events will inevitably spill out on the page. However, despite his seeming understanding, the son in *The Lost Child* also brands his parents as mentally unwell—'He tells us we are insane. That we always have been.'[306] This accusation is also repeated by Jake Myerson in his *Daily Mail* interviews—'Branding his parents "insane", "naïve" and prone, at times, to fantasy.'[307] Although it was the publication of his story that Jake Myerson originally objected to, he also makes it clear that his parents 'insanity' is directly tied

[304] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 57.
[305] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 30.
[306] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 206.
[307] Rawstone, '"My Big Mouth Mum Was Right"'.

to the process of writing: '"They both write, so there isn't even one going out to work to root everything back to normality. I think that breeds a certain form of insanity."'[308]

What was implicit in *The Lost Child* becomes explicit in *Nonfiction,* as a large narrative thread is about the practice and morality of writing. Cooke calls the 'new audacity' writers in her study 'didactic' in that they are:

> centrally concerned with detailing what makes or sustains a life writer, and in so doing refuses to withhold information about the difficulties entailed in such a commitment. [They] offer the women who read them, and especially the women who are or wish to be writers working in an auto/biographical mode, points of recognition that are not only oriented towards fantasies of success but rather predominantly shaped by the ugly but necessary experiences of failure, frustration, and betrayal.[309]

This is certainly true in *Nonfiction*. When the narrator is talking to her student, Jake Myerson's assessment of writers is reiterated: 'Writing's a balancing act, I tell her. An act of madness, of sustained and necessary obsession, of insane self-belief.'[310] It seems as though, in order to write decent prose, the writer must let go, take away any external voices, and only do what feels right. When the narrator, in *Nonfiction*, is asked by her brother not to write about her mother's funeral, she responds, 'I tell him I would not dream of writing about it. And I'm not lying, of course I'm not - not then.'[311] Yet the reader sees that she has written about it, that she is not to be trusted. A similar thing happens when the narrator meets her lover again after many years apart. First, he gives her a back-handed compliment, 'Fiction. It's very clever what you do,

[308] Rawstone, '"My Big Mouth Mum Was Right"'.
[309] Cooke, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing*, 92.
[310] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 221.
[311] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 84.

hiding in plain sight like that', then he asks her never to write about him. She responds, 'I tell him I wouldn't dream of it.'[312] Similarly, Margeaux, the narrator's friend in Sheila Heti's, *How Should a Person Be?* says 'just promise you won't betray me', yet the narrator does by using Margeaux's actual words in the text, precisely the thing Margeaux had been afraid of. [313] We see authors aren't to be trusted. Later, Myerson's narrator explores the issue further:

> My mother was right about me. She is right. Because the terrible thing about writers - the thing that singles them out from all the other normal and careful and decent people - is what happens to them, however many painful and unexpected and frightening things, and however much they might stand to lose by describing them, it doesn't stop them – // Nothing stops them. Nothing. Once they've started, that's it -- they'll go to any lengths to find the right words.[314]

Alison Bechdel in *Are You My Mother?* says something very similar, 'Well writers are kind of monstrous, aren't they? They don't have like normal human ethics.'[315] Within her text, Bechdel questions her own ethics in writing about her mother. She says, 'I thought I had her tacit permission to tell the story, but in fact I never asked for it and she never gave it to me. Our truth is a fragile one.'[316] However, by the end of the text, the mother, reading out a quote from Dorothy Gallagher, seems to give her daughter permission. The quote is: 'The writer's business

[312] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 247.
[313] Heti, *By Sheila Heti - How Should a Person Be?*, 66. Margeaux Williamson is a real person, as is another character in the book, Sholem Krishtalka. Krishtalka 'declares his discomfort at being 'utilised' in the book in an interview with Heti. See: 'You and Me and Her and Us and Them: A Conversation on Using and Being Used', *CMagazine*, accessed 18 July 2024, https://cmagazine.com/articles/you-and-me-and-her-and-us-and-them-a-conversation-on-using-and-b.
[314] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 275.
[315] Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*, 66.
[316] Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*, 200.

is to find the shape in unruly life and to serve her story not, you may note, to serve her family, or to serve the truth, but to serve the story.'[317]

Myerson's narrator feels guilt, yet the novel itself mitigates and excuses the action of writing about family. Although the narrator initially calls novel-writing, 'a frankly solipsistic artifice',[318] she demonstrates, through examples, how the 'best' writing comes from those who are unable to keep 'real-life' from infecting their art. A poet at a book festival expresses how although there are plenty of fictional elements in her work, they stem 'from her precise state of mind at the time, her experience of family, love, friendship, of loss and sorrow and the sometimes quite challenging events of her own real life.'[319] The student too, as discussed, begins to use family events as inspiration. This, the narrator tells us, much improves her work. When the student speaks about the process of using self in her work, the narrator comments, 'it's a kind of fiction which could not possibly have been written were it not for the real things that have happened to her in her real life. But then isn't that true of almost all novels at the end of the day?'[320] Another author whom Myerson meets at a party says that although she has been a successful writer for many years, it is only now, after her husband has left, that she is able to write without the sensation of someone looking over her shoulder. The author discovers herself to be 'a distinct being' and is now writing for herself alone. [321] Myerson's narrator concludes that her most recent practice 'is not so very different' from what the author is experiencing. [322] In this scenario, it is simultaneously as if readership is a by-product of the process and that the best writing (ironically, for readers) is done when self informs the author's work. This idea of

[317] Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*, 283. The original quote comes from Dorothy Gallagher. See: Dorothy Gallagher, 'Writers on Writing; Recognizing The Book That Needs To Be Written', *The New York Times*, 17 June 2002, sec. Books, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/17/books/writers-on-writing-recognizing-the-book-that-needs-to-be-written.html.
[318] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 56.
[319] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 126.
[320] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 254.
[321] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 238.
[322] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 240.

'self' is formed of two strands: exploiting real-life events; and allowing the 'self' to write without the idea of perceived judgement. Implicit in any work of good fiction, Myerson argues, is, as Jarred McGinnis frames it, 'the alchemising-self'.[323]

Myerson has a long history of using this 'self' in her work. In her first novel, *Sleepwalking,* she takes the facts of her parents' break-up and father's suicide to create a story about a pregnant woman having an affair.[324] In this novel, the narrator also has two sisters who have the same age difference as Myerson and her sisters. Details in *Sleepwalking*, such as her father shooting rats in a barn, can be found again in *Nonfiction.*[325] Much of the tension in *Sleepwalking* comes from this real past imagined into a fictional present, yet in her first book she doesn't go as far as she does in *Nonfiction*. In *Sleepwalking* the mother is portrayed as sympathetic and Myerson dedicates the book to her own mother; in *Nonfiction* the mother is a 'bully'.[326] As to which novel contains a true depiction is, without external evidence, impossible to decide. However, when the student talks about her own work in *Nonfiction*, she says, 'I've said things I didn't even know I felt, let alone dare write. The stuff about my mother, for instance. Well, I guess it's just lucky she wasn't around to read it.'[327] As we are told the narrator's own mother has not long died, it causes the reader to question if the parts of the book which describe her mother are only a thinly veiled account of her real life.

Throughout *Nonfiction* Myerson continues to exploit this use of 'self' to provide tension between what we know about her real-life and how this is portrayed within the book. This makes the book, like Wollstonecraft's *Letters,* rich in intertextuality. The chairperson at a book festival in *Nonfiction*, says to the narrator, 'let's not beat about the bush because this is key – she [the main character of the narrator's latest book] is a mother, exactly as you are. Is it

[323] McGinnis, Auto/Bio/Fiction in Practice: A Symposium.
[324] Julie Myerson, *Sleepwalking* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).
[325] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 44.
[326] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 8.
[327] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 222.

possible that in pursuing adultery so convincingly in your fiction, you're in fact expressing a real-life longing?'[328] The chairperson refuses to differentiate between narrator and author: both have had children and are married so they therefore must be one and the same. Thus, the chairperson's logic goes, by creating a protagonist who has an affair, the author herself has either had an affair or wants to have one. This statement, as is presumably Myerson's intention, smacks of sexism. It is highly unlikely such a question would be asked of a male author. Adultery as a father is a recurring theme in Updike's books, including his most famous *Rabbit* series.[329] Although Updike was known by those close to him to have had affairs,[330] I cannot find a single instance in the literature where Updike ever got asked about the connection between the characters in his books who have affairs and himself, as author, father, and husband. Maggie Nelson describes in *The Argonauts* how she too was subject to sexism at an author event. She writes:

> Place me now, like a pregnant cut out doll, at a "prestigious New York University" giving a talk on my book on cruelty. // During the Q&A, a well-known playwright raises his hand and says: I can't help but notice that you're with child, which leads me to the question—how did you handle the work on all this dark material [sadism, masochism, cruelty, violence, and so on] [sic] in your condition? // Ah yes, I think, digging a knee into the podium. Leave it to the old patrician white guy to call the lady speaker back to her body, so that no one misses the spectacle of that wild oxymoron, the pregnant woman who thinks. Which is really just a pumped-up version of that more general oxymoron, a woman who thinks.[331]

[328] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 124.
[329] John Updike, *Rabbit Angstrom A Tetralogy* (London: Everyman, 1995).
[330] Louis Menand, 'Imitation of Life', *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2014. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/28/imitation-of-life.
[331] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House, 2016), 113.

The reader sees it is not just the intelligence of the (pregnant) woman that is a problem for the questioner but that he is challenged by the subject matter emanating from a prospective mother. Nelson doesn't tell us if she contested the speaker yet notes that similar scenes 'recur at nearly every location of my so-called book tour'.[332] Myerson's narrator certainly does not refute the chair's question because she hasn't yet 'learned to be afraid of journalists.'[333] The intertextual reader remembers the furore over *The Lost Child* and feels concern about the narrator who is making the mistake of being too open. The 'learned' fear of journalists also confirms that the author and narrator are so closely aligned that they are more or less the same person. Not yet 'afraid', the narrator tells the chairperson, 'it's very tempting, sometimes, to take yourself off to places you daren't go to in real life.' This leads him to respond with excitement, 'You daren't have an extra-marital affair, but you'd like to?'[334]

Although the chairperson is meant to be seen as too literal and creepy, because Myerson has mixed real-life circumstance and fiction so thoroughly within her text, we see it is not too foolish of him to believe she may have either had an affair or wished for one. A tension therefore is created in the interspace between real and imagined. The reader doesn't want to identify with the chairperson, yet there is a suspicion that Myerson is laying clues to a confession either about an affair or a wish to have one. The reader, after all, does witness other elements of what could be seen as wish-fulfilment in *Nonfiction*. When the narrator expresses to her daughter that she doesn't feel as though she can write anymore, the daughter responds, 'Write about this, then. Write about your own life – your real fucking life.'[335] Is this the type

[332] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 113-4.
[333] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 124.
[334] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 125.
[335] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 271.

of thing Myerson wishes her son had said to her? An acknowledgment that our family's decisions affect our own lives and that we have every right to write about it? [336]

Writing, for the narrator in *Nonfiction*, is also acknowledged as a distraction from her real life. Because she is struggling with guilt about being a bad mother and having an affair, the narrator, 'escape[s] into writing. I write a novel about a woman who lets her child drown because she takes her eyes off her at the crucial terrible moment'.[337] Here is yet another example of intertextuality and the cross-over between fiction and nonfiction as the description of this book matches the plot of *Something Might Happen*, in which the narrator is having an affair and one of her children dies. Although Myerson frames the writing of this book as 'escape', we see that the choice of plot metaphorically relates to her own life and therefore is not true escapism: it is something parallel which may help the author understand things about the situation while creating a fictional world into which she can retreat. When the narrator gives advice to her student, she says, 'Much of the real energy of a book often comes from the things that aren't said or entirely understood, sometimes even by the author herself.'[338] The student, when finally learning to use her real life as inspiration in her novel, says, 'I don't go along with the idea of writing as therapy, […]. But it's weird how much lighter and calmer I feel.'[339] It is through the act of writing that the author begins to understand circumstance and through fictionalisation that a multiplicity of possibilities can be explored.

In *Nonfiction* one of these possibilities is for the author to be able to play with time. Although the narrator experiences time chronologically, life events experienced over decades

[336]Another example of wish-fulfilment can be found in *Out of Breath.* Published only a year before *The Lost Child* and in which the Yellolys are mentioned in the acknowledgments, *Out of Breath* has a thirteen-year-old narrator who can wish things into material existence. Through intertextual reading with *The Lost Child*, we see that the narrator's brother, Sam, holds many similarities to 'our boy' as he is rude, selfish, steals, smokes and is disruptive. In the last third of the novel, Sam performs the heroic act of saving a six-year-old's life. A person such as Sam (or 'our boy'), it seems, can be redeemed and learns to care about others. See: Julie Myerson, *Out of Breath* (London: Vintage, 2008).
[337] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 41.
[338] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 59.
[339] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 255.

abut one another without explanation. As mentioned previously this structure mimics the author's state of mind during the stress caused by the drug addicted daughter: 'Time blurs when you are dealing with chaos. Everything blurs. We too sometimes are a blur.'[340] The narrator of *Nonfiction* also declares that 'Plots are overrated, nothing like as necessary as people think they are.'[341] Yet these are not the only reasons for this unusual structure. Sometimes the author positions the past sections as the narrator's memories, that is, she recalls things. However, many sections have no introduction as to why past events are being told. They are stand-alone incidents which, as in the Mary Yelloly story in *The Lost Child*, allow for mirroring, reflection, and psychological revelations as to the impact of the past on the present. In the case of *The Lost Child*, the Yelloly past is primarily a metaphor to understand the present and is not directly related to the author's life; in *Nonfiction*, it is the narrator's personal past which, although not explicitly stated, impacts present decisions. The narrator tells us 'This is not a ghost story.'[342] and repeats this later in the text, 'This is definitely not a ghost story.'[343] This repeated denial makes us suspect that the text is, in fact, a ghost story of sorts. Memories rise from the narrator's past and haunt the present.

Like *Inside the Mask, The Lost Child* could also be described as a ghost story, particularly in the end section of the novel when the narrator speaks to Mary Yelloly in the church. It also has echoes of other ghosts, such as the 'ghostly imprint' of a now demolished house where Mary Yelloly used to live.[344] There is also the 'haunted' Carrow Abbey. [345] There are the ghost-like memories of 'our boy' as a small child too: 'Things keep coming back. Things I haven't thought about in years.'[346] The parents also consider different ghostly presents in which drugs

[340] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 2.
[341] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 60.
[342] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 138.
[343] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 227.
[344] Myerson, *The Lost Child*, 45.
[345] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 178.
[346] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 63.

hadn't taken hold. The father, for example, at a Lord's cricket match, 'could hardly bear to look at all the other fathers coming in with their seventeen-or-eighteen-year-old sons.'[347] This sense of past mixing with the present is taken to an extreme in *Nonfiction*. The flattening of time through the non-chronological structure, gives weight to the idea that the past has equal weight to the present and is always with us. Indeed, it sometimes seems as though the present is overwhelmed by the past, rendering the characters insubstantial and ethereal: proven when the narrator herself 'look[s] like a ghost'.[348] At this moment, she is having an affair, thinking obsessively about the other man: it is as though she can't be present in her own 'real' life. Later in the text, the narrator tells us a photographer she admires has offered to take her portrait and she compares herself unfavourably to the photographer's other subjects whom she believes are women with a strong sense of self. She writes, 'Her photographs are all about what's on the inside and I am a ghost, a blur, devoid of substance or heart. There is nothing real in me, nothing substantial or solid.'[349] It seems that it is only through writing that the self is created.

At the end of *Nonfiction*, the narrator describes a book which she would like to write about—'a man and a woman – who, for a very long time now, have been living a life of despair, unable to do anything to help their only child, a daughter.'[350] She is quite clearly describing *Nonfiction*'s main plot. The narrator says she doesn't know 'if it's fiction or nonfiction',[351] but by this stage of reading, we understand that it is both. Characters are the 'ghosts' or avatars of the author and her family created out of real-life and imagined situations. The narrator in *Nonfiction* asks herself, 'What was the point in making up stories when life itself was so dramatic and difficult?',[352] and answers the question through the form of the text. Therefore, the equal weighting of the title has been borne out: it is both nonfiction and a novel. In

[347] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 213.
[348] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 176
[349] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 249-50.
[350] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 275.
[351] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 275.
[352] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 236.

Nonfiction, Myerson's narrator tells us that, 'I always write from a place of complete darkness. [...] I worked out long ago that the only reason I write is in order to find out what I want to say.'[353] As in the autofiction discussed in Chapter Two, the use of real-life events combined with fiction is a form of intertextuality, by which the reader is encouraged to know what is actually true in order to deepen psychological understanding of characters, themes, and, crucially, the author. With knowledge of the facts and the controversy both in and surrounding *The Lost Child*, reading *Nonfiction* becomes a rich exploration into what it is to be an author—to be living with difficulties while writing—and how the writing process can mine trauma for art, catalysing it, so that the reader and author come to an understanding together about what is significant for the writer.

Inside the Mask, with its dependence on both traditional ghosts and ghostly memories rising against the backdrop of a traumatic present, is also an attempt to mine trauma for art. As my first long-form book, intertextuality is not as easily accessible to the reader, yet I attempt to provide it through my use of Bensley, encouraging the reader to tease out parallels and themes. Like Myerson, I also cross boundaries in terms of those things it is acceptable to tell as a wife and mother. I detail my eldest son's distress and my husband's mental breakdown. Therefore, as Myerson did, I asked my family to read my text in order to get permission to publish. One of my subjects asked me to take something out and I complied; the rest of the family gave their full consent. However, as my eldest son has high-functioning autism, the issue of consent becomes muddied. None of us can guess what might happen if the book were to be published, but in the case of my eldest son it is difficult to assess if he can make an informed decision. Since he was very young, I have spoken for him and often made social decisions for him. Now, I am asking him to do this for himself. Zachary Snider, interviewed for Lynch's chapter for *Research Methodologies,* states how 'ethically, writing about one's

[353] Myerson, *Nonfiction: A Novel*, 61.

family is one of the biggest risks that a writer, especially a memoirist, can take, one that determines whether or not his family will ever speak to him again.'[354] Although I don't believe my family will abandon me, I do see the book as potentially hurting those I love. I believe I have written honestly and with love about family situations but as the Myerson controversy shows, this may not be enough. As I am not yet published, much of my decision-making is, at this point, moot. However, if it were to be picked up by a publisher, I will address the issues with my family once more and, if possible, invite experts to discuss with myself and my family the implications of publishing. It is certain that more ethical decisions will have to be made.

[354] Lynch, 'Writing Memoir', 15.

Chapter 4: Theory and Praxis: tramping the borders of time, space, gender, genre, truth and lies.

The theory and praxis of autoethnography, psychogeography and reenactment were vital research tools within my research and writing of *Inside the Mask*. Each holds the idea of the researcher as central, yet acknowledges they are not a fixed being. Liminality is encouraged whether through subject, physical space, or identity. The researcher undertaking each method is continually asked to analyse and recognise states of being. The autoethnographer may ask, 'How am I affected by this social setting?'; the psychogeographer enquires, 'What feelings does this place engender?'; and the reenactor questions, 'What is it like to be another in a specific situation?' Self-awareness, imagination, and empathy, within these research methods, is not only desirable but necessary. This chapter investigates the theory and praxis of how each of the strands in *Inside the Mask* was informed, reinvigorated, and fundamentally changed by these complementary research methods.

Investigating their similarities, I explore the utility of autoethnography and psychogeography for the action-researcher. I examine how psychogeography can be applied not only when taking long journeys but also utilised within short trips and/or when one is stationary. I assess the influence of Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image' and the Situationists' 'the uncanny' had on my writing. Using artist Sophie Calle's work as an example, I feature 'psychogeographical maps' and explore the act of following as a psychogeographic practice. I investigate masculinist, doctrinaire, and plagiarism controversies in psychogeography, using texts by Guy Debord, W.G. Sebald, Will Self and Iain Sinclair, and evidence the feminist reclamation of psychogeography by authors Lauren Elkin, Noreen Masud, and Virginia Woolf. Reenactment as an action-research method to elucidate historical understandings of people and place is evaluated with reference to Jeremy Deller. Finally, I dissect Debord's idea of

détournement and interrogate if Bensley's walk can be seen as an act of *détournement* and investigate how the final form of my reenactment might be considered a feminist act of reclamation for Bensley's victims.

In using the archive material collected from the *Findmypast* website and other places (listed in Appendix Two) and examining it through a feminist lens, I took on the role of what Eugen Bacon, in his 'Creative Research: Mixing Methods in Practice-Led Research to Explore a Model of Stories-Within-A-Story to Build a Novel', calls an 'action-researcher'.[355] That is, I interrogated the effect of my findings on self and extrapolated how Bensley's wives must have reacted to his behaviour. Unlike traditional research, in which subjects are outside the design and methodology, I allowed my subjects (including myself) to inform the work—even bringing one of Bensley's wives to life as an imagined character and having conversations with her. Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson in their *Action Research Dissertation* guide, write that action research allows, 'knowledge [to] arrive[s] retrospectively'.[356] This, I believe, is fitting for a narrative in which the narrator/researcher changes her view on Bensley due to unfolding evidence. Using my archive research as a springboard for speculation, parallels, introspection, and imagination, my knowledge about the women in Bensley's life grew throughout the process. Accordingly, I discovered the 'synergy', described by Eugen Bacon, between my 'dual roles of creating art in practice as an artist and unearthing knowledge as an academic.'[357]

In terms of methodology, one way in which this action research was undertaken both during and after the archive research process was through autoethnography. The term autoethnography was first used in 1975 by Karl. G. Heider, an ethnologist, to describe when

[355] Eugen Bacon, 'Creative Research: Mixing Methods in Practice-Led Research to Explore a Model of Stories-Within-A-Story to Build a Novel', *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 14, no. 2 (7 July 2017): 235–56, 236.
[356] Kathryn Herr and Gary L Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty* (London: Thousand Oaks, Calif., 2005), 2.
[357] Bacon, 'Creative Research: Mixing Methods', 236.

research subjects give their own personal testimony.[358] Interrogating 'positionality' (how the social researcher fundamentally changes the dynamic of any social group they are present within), Walter Goldschmidt argued that all ethnography is, to a large degree, autobiographical and, because of this autobiographical element, researchers were in danger of clouding findings due to implicit and explicit biases.[359] A solution to this emerged in the 1990s. Carolyn Ellis, leading proponent of researcher-centred social research, argued that if researchers applied the personal subjective point of view alongside their findings, then the explicit nature of this would act as both a valid research finding in itself and as a check and balance. In their overview of autoethnography, Ellis, Adams and Bochner describe the process as using 'the self as data' and that autoethnography is 'an approach to research and writing and […] seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)'.[360] As such, autoethnography rejects binary oppositions between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and the personal and the political. Therefore, administered as a method for social research, autoethnography 'is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.'[361] Although not attempting a wide social research project, my narrative, inspired by my archive research, assesses the treatment of women and how their gendered responsibilities affect their decisions. By focussing on self, I attempted to connect with historical cultural gendered experiences and to collapse binary oppositions between

[358] Karl G. Heider, 'What Do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 31, no. 1 (1975): 3–17, 9.
[359] Walter Goldschmidt, 'Anthropology and the Coming Crisis: An Autoethnographic Appraisal', *American Anthropologist* 79, no. 2 (1977): 293–308, 303.
[360] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum, Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011), 1.
[361] Ellis, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', 1.

myself and my subjects. As Pester writes, 'an alternate knowledge is crafted through personally willed connections.'[362]

I was also directed by the material to disseminate and explore the themes of 'self-creation' and 'personal narrative'. Because the Bensley research material detailed both false and true evidence and because Bensley himself created a false narrative, I was enabled to include my husband's psychotic break in which he lost sense of who he was, and my own experience of trauma-induced blackout. Therefore, what might have seemed like an unfortunate series of events, made thematic sense when placed within the context of asking autoethnographic questions about selfhood and truth, inspired by the archive and oral research material.

Although not yet fully explored in academia, closely tied to the practice of autoethnography, is psychogeography. Psychogeography was originally created by Lettrist and Situationist, Guy Debord, to disrupt what he termed as the 'spectacle'. His philosophy, set out in, *The Society of the Spectacle*, takes the form of two hundred and twenty-one short theses structured like aphorisms. These elucidate what he believes 'the spectacle' to be. In thesis six, Debord writes:

> The spectacle, understood in its totality, is simultaneously the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, its added decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, advertisement or direct consumption of entertainments, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption. The form and the content of the spectacle are identically the total

[362] Pester, 'Archive Fanfiction', 121.

> justification of the conditions and the ends of the existing system. The spectacle is also the permanent presence of this justification, to the extent that it occupies the principal part of the time lived outside of modern production.[363]

In short, the 'spectacle' *is* the capitalist system in which appearances and images dominate, overshadowing authentic experiences and meaningful interactions. Debord recommended certain 'artistic' interventions to wake the viewer from a capitalistic 'sleep' induced by omniscient capitalist images and produce.[364] One of these is *détournement*, which will be outlined in detail later. The other is psychogeography.

In the act of psychogeography, the researcher walks the city and focuses on how the places make them feel. They are encouraged to question, in terms of resulting emotions, how city planning funnels the pedestrian through areas designed purely for the capitalistic activities of work, shopping and tourism. Conversely, 'liminal' places, such as suburbs, industrial estates and wastelands, are also to be explored to discover the mechanics of the 'spectacle': how it hides the means of production, prioritises and implies meaning only through facades.[365] Therefore, at first glance, it seems that there is little which connects psychogeography to autoethnography as the former, founded in philosophy, is focused on walking (often for miles) through the urban environment, and the latter, emerging from the social sciences, on people. Within autoethnography, there is also an acknowledgement that the individual fundamentally changes the dynamic; whereas in psychogeography, because it is based in *flânerie* (analysed later), the researcher often positions themselves as a blank receptive participant who does not change the environment. Where superficial differences between traditional autoethnography

[363] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 3.
[364] Debord states, 'As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain necessary. The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep.' Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* 7.
[365] Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', 11.

and psychogeography truly emerge is within the 'rules' of psychogeography set out by Debord, as will be discussed later. Autoethnography has no such strictures.

However, common to both is that the researcher is explicitly at the centre of the research and their self-findings are not only valid but integral to the methodology. As in autoethnography, psychogeography rejects binary oppositions between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self, and others. Writers such as Elkin, Masud, Sebald, Self, and Sinclair also use psychogeographical methods, both within urban and rural environments, to collapse boundaries between art and science, and the personal and the political within their texts. This can be seen most clearly, both practically and metaphorically, in psychogeography's focus on 'liminal spaces'.[366] 'Liminal' refers, not only to physical space, but conveys the thematic borders between science and art, personal and political; or, in the case of my work, the shadowy divisions between truth, lies, and narrative. Similarities also emerge when one notes how they have both been employed within the arts to describe practice which focuses on the research of self.[367] As Brydie-Leigh Bartleet writes in *Handbook of Autoethnography,* 'When projects sit at the interface between artistic research and autoethnography, artists ask deeply autoethnographic questions through artistic means and deeply artistic questions through autoethnographic means.'[368] The same could be applied to psychogeography. Both practices are methods by which one can explore liminality and recognise the effect of situation, society, and environment on self. The researcher in both methods is necessary and integral.

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[366] Lester et al, in their paper, *Walking Cities: London* posit that this idea of liminal spaces is a particularly British form of psychogeography whereby, 'walkers explore urban fringes and liminal spaces, holding a desire to look again at the familiar.' Ruth Bretherick, 'Walking Cities: London', *Sculpture Journal* 27, no. 1 (January 2018): 139–41, 139.

[367] Examples of autoethnographical literature can be found throughout this thesis. For examples of autoethnographical plays see: Susana Pendzik, Renée Emunah, and David Read Johnson, eds., *The Self in Performance: Autobiographical, Self-Revelatory, and Autoethnographic Forms of Therapeutic Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016).

[368] Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, 'Artistic Autoethnography: Exploring the Interface Between Autoethnography and Artistic Research', in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, eds. Tony E. Adams, Stacy Linn Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis (Routledge, 2021), 113.

Throughout *Inside the Mask* I used both autoethnography and psychogeography, choosing psychogeography to be my main mode of working. Modern psychogeography's emphasis on long walks, as seen in the miles-long treks undertaken by Sebald, Self, Sinclair, Elkin, Masud and others, was, at first, a suitable choice because of Bensley's long walk. In the initial planning for *Inside the Mask*, I intended to follow stretches of Bensley's walk but Covid restrictions and family responsibilities made this impossible. I was only able to make day trips when restrictions eased and, for more than ten months of the eighteen month's span of my book, I was restricted to my house and only permitted a short walk each day. However, despite these curtailments, I believe that psychogeographic research was undertaken. Like Wollstonecraft in *Letters*, I used psychogeographic techniques—particularly *dérive* (to be discussed later)—throughout, even when confined to my house. Widening the traditional definition to include short walks and stationary research was not only an appropriate choice for *Inside the Mask* but to free up the borders of psychogeography is an inclusive and necessary action, as will be discussed later.

One of the central ideas embedded in Debord's psychogeography is *dérive*.[369] A direct translation of *dérive* is 'drift' and, within psychogeography, drifting takes place both in the physical act of researching places by walking through them; and in the writing of the research, to be outlined later. Although directed by a desire to sell postcards and perform in music halls, because of the erratic nature of Bensley's 'walk around the world', it could be said that he 'drifted' as he had no clear geographical final destination. Even after his 'walk around the world', Bensley found it difficult to settle and one can trace him hopping from town to town every two or three years. For research, I explored Thetford, South Norwood, Jermyn Street, the V&A, Kensal Rise, and Wivenhoe using psychogeographical methods in each of these

[369] Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', in *Situationist International Anthology*, *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 62-5.

locations. I was either directed by old maps or performed the physical aspect of 'drift' by allowing feelings about the environment to dictate directions.

During my archive research, I discovered a Google Map designed by New Zealander, Tim Kirby, in which Kirby had traced Bensley's walk by analysing contemporary news articles.[370] By using Kirby's map and through further evidence provided by close reading of local newspapers, I created my own route through London which I hoped mimicked Bensley's. It is in this section of the book I performed the most traditional method of psychogeography. It was a long walk and, in preparation, I transposed maps of 1907 onto present day maps, noting the differences as I walked. A stretch of the Old Kent Road had, for example, only one church in Harry's day; for me, there was a plethora. This could be argued to be a psychogeographical practice as, in his essay, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', Debord writes:

> The production of psychogeographical maps, or even the introduction of alterations such as more or less arbitrarily transposing maps of two different regions, can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but total insubordination to habitual influences (influences generally categorized as tourism, that popular drug as repugnant as sports or buying on credit). [371]

Thus, following Bensley's footsteps, I was taken from my 'habitual influences' and moved through the landscape for reasons removed from consumerism and 'repugnant tourism'. I was able to do this on each of my walks, but the long walk in particular allowed me to come to new understandings about the difficulty of Bensley's mission. I found a new respect for him while walking only a fraction of what he walked. As I did on all my excursions both beyond the home

[370] Kirby, 'Harry Bensley's Masked Journey'.
[371] Debord, 'Introduction to A Critique of Urban Geography', 11.

and within it, I noted how the environment made me feel in the present and I conjectured on the emotions of my historical subjects. On my long walk as I passed the splendour of the Old Bailey, I understood how terrifying and humiliating it must have been for Bensley's wives during Bensley's bigamy trial. Although I chose not to critique contemporary places in Marxist terms, an echo of Debord's original intent was present. As Bensley's fraudulent 'wager' story and resulting walk was to make money from the sale of postcards, (that is, capitalistic), my reclamation of his walk for personal and academic reasons was a disruption of the original intent and psychogeographical in nature. I was subverting his walk; re-inventing it; disrupting the original capitalist foundation and replacing it with an alternative questioning narrative.

The act of following another person is also a psychogeographical act because of the way a journey undertaken by an unwitting leader can force the follower to experience their environment in new and unexpected ways. The practice of artist Sophie Calle influenced my research and her naming of her ex-lover as 'X' was mimicked in my text.[372] Calle also took following to an extreme, when she stalked strangers in Paris. In an interview with Jean Baudrillard, she says that she followed 'to play, to avoid boredom' but also compares her obsessions with her subject to romantic or erotic passion.[373] In 1979, when she heard that one of her subjects was going to Venice, she booked herself a flight to follow him there. On arriving in Venice, without him in her sight, she began an obsessive search just as I did with Bensley. The photos she took when she was looking for him came to form an artwork called *Suite Vénitienne*, which was subsequently turned into a book with accompanying commentary.[374] Baudrillard argues that *Suite Vénitienne* simultaneously promotes and undermines the narrative

[372] The name used for my ex-partner (X) in my creative text was inspired by a Calle exhibition, shown at the 2007 Venice Biennale, in which she took a 'break-up' email from her boyfriend and asked a hundred women to create art inspired by it. The boyfriend, Grégoire Bouillier, was dubbed 'X' in the artworks. Although my 'X' is obviously not Bouillier, I wanted to add my experience to this legion of interpretations. See: Grégoire Bouillier, *Report on Myself* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009).

[373] Jean Baudrillard and Sophie Calle, 'Suite Vénitienne/Please Follow Me', in *Sophie Calle: The Reader* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2009), 50.

[374] Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénitienne* (Los Angeles: Siglio, 2015).

of romantic seduction, because, by the end of Calle's stalking, her subject recognises her but does not confront her.[375] Ignoring obvious and troubling issues about consent, Calle describes the denouement as a 'banal end to this banal story.'[376] Similarly, my expectations of Bensley did not adhere to the romance I felt about his story at the start of my research. It seems that the more the subject becomes 'real' through the psychogeographical act of following (either physically or metaphorically, through the archives and the imagination), the less room there is for our own invented 'false' narrative about them.

Finally, following Bensley's physical 'drifting' throughout his life was a suitable choice for researching an historical subject. In Thesis 137 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes how, 'Life is seen as a one-way journey through a world whose meaning lies elsewhere: the pilgrim is the person who leaves cyclical time behind and actually becomes the traveller that everyone else is symbolically.'[377] Debord was influenced by German philosopher, Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's final book was *The Passagenwerk* translated to *The Arcades Project.*[378] This incomplete text, of over a thousand pages, contains information and commentary on the culture of *flânerie* which can best be described as walking, idling and people watching. The art of *flânerie* according to French poet and writer, André Breton, in his book *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, 'was a strategic device to give up conscious control, submit to risk and chance, and reveal the unconsciousness zones of urban life.'[379] Keith Bassett in his 2004 paper on 'Walking as an Aesthetic Practice and a Tool', describes Benjamin's beliefs on *flânerie* thus: when one adopts an 'ultrareceptive posture [and enters] a state of grace with chance […] something will happen'.[380] What Benjamin believed might happen, was that the

[375] Baudrillard and Calle, 'Suite Vénitienne/Please Follow Me', 50.
[376] Baudrillard and Calle, 'Suite Vénitienne/Please Follow Me', 50.

[377] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 74.
[378] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).
[379] Andre Breton, *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon, 1993), 106.
[380] Bassett, 'Walking as an Aesthetic Practice', 399.

person walking in such a state might gain access to the past through a 'dialectical image' when 'remembering and awakening are most intimately related' and past and present moments merge together to provide illumination and awakening from the dreamlike 'collective consciousness.'[381]

Taking inspiration from Benjamin, Surrealists adopted a theory of the 'uncanny' which, is described by Briony Fer et al, in a paper on 'Realism, Rationalism and Surrealism', as the return of rituals, beliefs and events that have been repressed through modernism.[382] According to Bassett, Surrealists claimed to have experienced the 'uncanny' when walking around flea markets, and the like, where chance discoveries of strange or outmoded objects might precipitate a sense of the return of historically repressed moments.[383] Author and practising psychogeographer, Will Self, in his book *Psychogeography*, critically describes this experience as 'walking backwards to roll back the years to some poorly imagined Arcadian past, where livestock, saints and the virginal abide by the Laws and a pleasing sfumato obscures everything',[384] yet he too is entranced by the idea and recognises himself as 'an insurgent against the contemporary world, an ambulatory time traveller.'[385] This notion of being a time-traveller was something which I wished to achieve in my creative nonfiction during both my numerous research trips and my enforced stay at home during Covid restrictions. Indeed, layering time within my *dérive* by noting which physical structures had remained since Bensley's time and which had been replaced, allowed me to create fictional historical scenes and characters through Benjamin's 'dialectical' images. I also allowed the notion of being a time-traveller to permeate my work with excursions into personal memory, fiction, and the creation of Lily as a character.

[381] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 389.
[382] Briony Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 200.
[383] Bassett, 'Walking as an Aesthetic Practice', 399.
[384] Will Self, *Psychogeography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 15.
[385] Self, *Psychogeography*, 29.

David Frisby in his book *Fragments of Modernity*, writes that for the situationist participant to excavate hidden secrets, as I did with Bensley, they must take on three roles, that of archaeologist, collector and *flâneur*.[386] My site visits and archive material were my archaeological sites. I collected realia including Edwardian costume, knight's helmet, and a postcard which enabled reflection within the confines of my own home. And finally, my 'drifting' around Bensley's 'stomping grounds' were an act of *flânerie*. Using these methods of psychogeographical 'action research', I was able to unearth and imagine the repressed histories of the women in Bensley's life. By excavating and collecting material about the women and then using *dérive* within my long and short walks, when stationary, and in the act of writing, I desired to collapse the past and come to an understanding about how life might have been. Like Lauren Elkin writes in her book on female *flâneurs*, I wished to be 'saturated with in-betweenness'.[387] There is also the notion of a personal past which is unearthed through walking: an in-between state where you are all the people you have ever been and simultaneously the truest self you can be. Noreen Masud explores this after her walk from Ely to Welney. She writes, 'I felt powerfully myself. That self was awkward, badly assembled like a marionette, singed around the edges and hostile. And there was room for me, in that moment to be all of those things, without apology.'[388]

A similar work to mine, in which the author follows in the footsteps of an historical figure, is Ian Sinclair's *Edge of the Orison.*[389] Sinclair, one of the most famous proponents of psychogeography, followed in the footsteps of poet John Clare who, almost two hundred years ago, escaped from a psychiatric hospital in Epping Forest and walked to Northborough, eighty

[386] David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), 212.
[387] Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016), 22.
[388] Noreen Masud, *A Flat Place* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2023), 67.
[389] Iain Sinclair, *Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare's 'Journey out of Essex'* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).

miles away. In his text, Sinclair wrote not only about Clare's history but also wove in the story of his wife's ancestors, one of whom she believed to be Clare. Duncan Wu in his review for the *Independent,* while praising the style and structure of the book, contends that Sinclair, 'is not writing a biography, and thus never "finds" [Clare] in that conventional sense.'[390] Wu's argument is that Sinclair does not engage in traditional research and instead shadows Clare 'haphazardly' with several collaborators but, in doing so, 'His excursions are like pilgrimages, in the sense that they are intended to give the dead their due, to propitiate spirits.'[391] In an idea which echoes both Benjamin's 'dialectical image' and Herr and Anderson's notion that 'knowledge arrives retrospectively', Wu regards Sinclair's writing as 'more like a process of retrieval' than a straight biography.[392] Through my excursions and through my archival and imaginative research, I too wished to 'retrieve' both Bensley's motivations and explore the effect the landscape, history and false stories had on Bensley's wives.

Throughout, Sinclair uses *dérive* in terms of drifting through a landscape *and* in the writing of his piece. This technique, although inspired by Debord's original idea of psychogeography, was not prescribed by him. The work of early psychogeographers instead recorded their findings via maps, small essays, or film in which the researcher is less embedded in autobiographical terms.[393] Although many writers, including Wollstonecraft, could be said to have been writing using 'drift' in the past, 'drift' as the term for the written form of psychogeography did not solidify until writers such as Self and Sinclair popularised it in the early 2000s. Since then, writing text which 'drifts' has become a signifier of the genre. Unrestricted by 'monomyth' and seeking to disrupt the worn grooves of 'habitual

[390] Duncan Wu, "Edge of the Orison, by Iain Sinclair", *The Independent*, 13 October 2005, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/edge-of-the-orison-by-iain-sinclair-319437.html.
[391] Wu, "Edge of the Orison, by Iain Sinclair".
[392] Wu, "Edge of the Orison, by Iain Sinclair".
[393] R. D. Crano, 'Debord, Guy', Senses of Cinema, 4 April 2010. https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2007/great-directors/debord/.

influences',[394] the modern psychogeographer explores any idea triggered by environment. Masud, for example, deftly weaves many disparate aspects into her work. In her chapter on Newcastle Moor, she seamlessly delves into matters about landscape, history of the moor, lockdown restrictions, memory, cPTSD, racist human zoos, the effects of colonialism, her cat, kite-flying in Pakistan, while simultaneously keeping the narrative thread of her work which is, at once, travelling from point A to point B *and* her personal history of trauma.[395] Similarly, Sinclair in the *Edge of Orison* writes about many disparate things—for example, the detritus of modern-day life found in hotel bedrooms. Wu comments that in *Edge of the Orison,* because of this 'drifting' style, 'past and present are at times indistinguishable.'[396] Similarly, my psychogeographical *dérive* in written form allowed me to describe my journeys through the places Bensley had lived, worked, and walked, *and* insert social, historical, and personal observations thus collapsing boundaries between past and present. It was also a method of writing which is possible when one is restricted to one place. The chapters in which I was unable to walk far due to Covid restrictions can still be categorised as psychogeography because of my utilisation of *dérive* and how environment, no matter how familiar, can spark reflection and memory. In Chapter Seven, for example, the quality of light in the narrator's familiar bedroom allows reflections on self and story, enabling me to weave in Covid, Bensley and the foreshadowing question of whether we can ever know anyone.

> At ten, I fall asleep, and wake at three in the morning, confined by the memory-foam mattress. I carry skeins of nightmares, burn hot or am slick with cold sweat. Sometimes I think the cause may be the menopause; other times I know, without a doubt, that it is Covid. I am about to die. Drowsy, I

[394] Guy Debord, 'Introduction to A Critique of Urban Geography', 11. .
[395] Masud, 'Newcastle Moor', *A Flat Place,* 123-150.
[396] Wu, 'Edge of the Orison, by Iain Sinclair'.

> look at my husband in the dim light and hardly recognise him. Who are you? I think. How did we arrive here together? And throughout, I think of Harry in prison. We turned the dusty drill/ And sweated on the mill. When can I return to him? When will his ghost return to me?[397]

In *Edge of the Orison,* Iain Sinclair describes psychogeographic walks as 'a floating autobiography'.[398] Masud uses walks in precisely this way. In her chapter on Orford Ness, she writes:

> Complex PTSD is different from PTSD. It doesn't turn on a single, traumatic event that happened to you. A single *event*. An event that *happened* to you. An event that happened to *you*. It's a story you can't claim as yours. It's the hole in your head. […] When I do tell the story, I don't know how to put the emphases in the right places; how to make it matter in the right ways, or not matter in the wrong ways. I tell it flatly, because I don't know how else to tell it.[399]

Flat land is a metaphor for the 'flat affect' one suffers during complex post-traumatic stress disorder—that is, having little response to emotional stimuli because of past trauma.[400] She is comforted by the flat landscape as, just in her history of trauma, no single feature dominates. After her walk on Orford Ness, Masud tells her friends why she left Pakistan and asks, '"Is it a story? […] I never know whether it's a story?"'[401] As this memory is saturated with trauma and, therefore, she experiences flatness in recalling it, she doesn't know if it has the arc of

[397] McQueen, *Inside the Mask,* 73.
[398] Sinclair, *Edge of the Orison,* 106.
[399] Masud, *A Flat Place,* 80.
[400] 'Flat Affect: Symptoms, Conditions, and Treatment', 11 September 2017, https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/319357.
[401] Masud, *A Flat Place,* 91.

Campbell's monomyth and whether it is even worth telling. Using psychogeography, and the metaphor of the flat place, she is able to negotiate the 'flat effect'. Indeed, she recognises that 'Flat landscapes ask us to tolerate not knowing things. Not knowing what is beneath the surface of our everyday experience.'[402] Therefore, like Kempe and Wollstonecraft, she chooses a different way to explore autobiography because traditional narrative arcs are a poor formula to demonstrate her lived experience.

Although Masud can now 'tolerate not knowing things', she also understands that the flat landscape should not be taken at face value. Visible, to the carefully trained eye, are marks of trauma. Alistair Bonnett, in his paper on 'The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography', proposes that, in Ian Sinclair's texts, 'the modern landscape becomes a site of creative purgatory, a necessary violence that simultaneously anchors the writer in modernism while establishing marginal histories and spaces as expressions of cultural and social loss.'[403] Recounted alongside her own experience of emigrating to the UK and her childhood in Pakistan, a country once ruled and exploited by Britain, Masud uses the landscape to explore the material, historical and psychological effects of colonialism, including the previously mentioned 'human zoo' on page 138, the partition of India on page 21, and a wall in Orford Ness built by Chinese labour battalions on page 90. She writes, 'Children in colonies, or ex-colonies, grow up within postcolonial trauma, thinking that their lives somehow don't exist, that they are the defective shadows of the Western world.'[404] Places which at first seem flat and without narrative are saturated with a violent history of colonialism and its effect on marginalised people. Using psychogeographic methods, Masud demonstrates how even the most seemingly benign landscape has within it literal landmarks built by people exploited by Empire. Thus, she brings stories of oppression and the resulting trauma to light. What one

[402] Masud, *A Flat Place*, 13.
[403] Alastair Bonnett, 'The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia in British Psychogeography', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 1 (1 January 2009): 45–70, 45.
[404] Masud, *A Flat Place*, 44.

might perceive as bucolic and untouched for centuries, becomes in Masud's hands, a multi-layered site in which self, history and geography are unflinchingly explored.

I too was writing of marginal histories while being anchored in the modern world, which, in the face of covid, madness and assault, was, at times, purgatorial. Bonnett writes how the psychogeographer has a 'quixotic, love-hate relationship with the past'.[405] My research into Bensley's history was certainly a quixotic venture, at first fuelled by admiration which soon curdled into dismay when the extent of Bensley's frauds were revealed through the archive. On my long walk and on my trips to London and South Norwood, I also confronted my personal past: my younger self and her willingness to believe X's narrative. With echoes of Benjamin and the Situationists' theory of the uncanny, Wu believes that Sinclair's type of action research is 'a species of divination' and that Sinclair 'writes as the detective of a cosmic conspiracy.'[406] I, too, was this kind of researcher: *dérive* allowed me to examine Bensley's fraud in terms of the effect it had on his contemporaries and on myself, as narrator, over a hundred years later. Rebecca Solnit describes her mental state on long walks in *Wanderlust* and how images from the past arose. She writes, 'I was rediscovering and getting to know people who were long since dead and forgotten.'[407] Using psychogeographic methods, whether walking or stationary, allowed me to experience the same type of rediscovery. This included people from my past and Edwardians I had never met.

I also embraced psychogeography precisely because the system is, according to Phil Smith in a paper for *Cultural Geographies,* 'troubled and disputed'.[408] I wanted to investigate, disrupt, and reimagine what has been historically known as a methodologically unsound and masculinist system of research. Geoff Nicholson, in his book *The Lost Art of Walking*, added

[405] Bonnett, 'The Dilemmas of Radical Nostalgia', 47.
[406] Duncan Wu, 'Edge of the Orison, by Iain Sinclair'.
[407] Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Granta, 2014), 130.
[408] Phil Smith, 'The Contemporary Dérive: A Partial Review of Issues Concerning the Contemporary Practice of Psychogeography', *Cultural Geographies* 17, no. 1 (2010): 103–22, 103.

his voice to a legion of critics when he called Debord's 'rules' for psychogeography 'twaddle', 'doctrinaire' and 'Stalinist'.[409] In terms of 'twaddle' and 'doctrinaire', Nicholson gives examples such as Debord's insistence that one should practice psychogeography in groups, and each member of the group will reach the same level of wakened unconscious.[410] I agree with Nicholson that, here, Debord stretches credulity and practicality. Nicholson's accusation of 'Stalinist' is verified by Mubi Breghenti's article in *Critical Sociology*, which proposes that Situationists advocate 'total societal overhaul and a state of permanent revolution.'[411] Thus, practising modern psychogeography means not only breaking traditional narrative rules but also the rules set out by Debord, a male 'doctrinaire' figure. This double disruption of the status quo had its attractions to me as a female researcher: simultaneously I could write in a style which demonstrated opposition to the Bensley myth *and* explore new ways of psychogeographic research and script.

There is another controversial aspect to psychogeographic writing which made it a fitting style for my story on Bensley: that is, how it plays with intertextuality. Common to modern psychogeography is the use of others' research and literature, weaving it into the writing so that it forms a new narrative. W.G. Sebald is possibly the most famous modern proponent of *dérive*, although he never described himself as a psychogeographer.[412] A long walk in the East Anglian landscape in *The Rings of Saturn*, for example, was inspiration for treatises on such things as silkworm cultivation and the English polymath and writer Thomas Browne. Through physical psychogeography and accompanying written *dérive*, Sebald explores memory, identity, and time. For Sebald, this style—also used within his fiction—allowed him to use

[409] Geoff Nicholson, *The Lost Art of Walking* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 152.
[410] Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', 62-66.
[411] Andrea Mubi Brighenti, 'Revolution and Diavolution: What Is the Difference?', *Critical Sociology* 34, no. 6 (2008): 787–802, 798.
[412] According to his biographer, Angier, the term Sebald most approved of was provided by his friend Michael Hamburger and is 'essayistic semi-fiction'. Angier, *Speak, Silence*, 347-348.

many sources to the extent that much of his work runs the risk of the accusation of plagiarism. Dwight Gardener in the *New York Times* writes:

> He stole ruthlessly, from Kafka, Wittgenstein and countless others to the extent that some of his books are nearly collages. Like Montaigne, he seemed not to count his borrowings but to weigh them. He put people he knew into his work and infuriated many of them, causing, in just one instance, his mother to lose her friends. More problematically, Sebald pushed past the moral dangers inherent in a German writer appropriating Jewish stories.[413]

Within his 'stealing' it can be argued that Sebald was using the situationist practise of 'cut-up'. Cut-up is a process whereby others' words are arranged to form new meanings and was termed by Debord as a 'minor détournement'.[414] Although nominally based in fact, psychogeographical writing prioritises fictional techniques over the traditional nonfiction rendering of factual information. That is, alongside the 'cut-up' technique, using poetic language, images, character delineation and dialogue, is part of the psychogeographer's oeuvre. However, Carole Angier, in *Speak, Silence: In Search of W.G. Sebald*, argues that, although these techniques are commonplace for psychogeographers, Sebald's particular method of mixing fact and fiction was morally questionable.[415] Indeed, in an article for the *Atlantic* by Judith Shulevitz, Angier says Sebald 'flat out lied.'[416] She was annoyed because Sebald had personally told her that a character in his novel, *The Emigrants*, was based on a real-life person

[413] Dwight Garner, 'A Biography of W.G. Sebald, Who Transformed His Borrowings into Lasting Art', *The New York Times*, 12 October 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/12/books/review-speak-silence-w-g-sebald-biography-carole-angier.html.
[414] Guy Debord, 'A User's Guide to Détournement', in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006)16. The use and meaning of detournement will be discussed later in this chapter.
[415] Whether Sebald was right in his use of fact and fiction is questioned from the outset of his biography and continues throughout. See: Angier, *Speak, Silence*, 24-6.
[416] Judith Shulevitz, 'W. G. Sebald Ransacked Jewish Lives for His Fictions', *The Atlantic*, 5 October 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/11/w-g-sebald-speak-silence-carol-angier/620180/.

but, in fact, as his family told her, that couldn't possibly be true. Other controversies emerged when friends and acquaintances of Sebald discovered that their true-life stories, which they had unwittingly told him, had been recounted within his fiction almost exactly as they had happened. Sebald even used other people's written autobiographical material to create identical plot points, settings, and characters. His friend Peter Jordan, who had loaned Sebald his family memoirs, including one by an aunt, Thea Gebhardt, was upset to see that the material, some of which was verbatim, was in *The Emigrants* and had not been credited.[417] Another 'victim' of Sebald's borrowings was Susi Bechhofer who'd published a memoir about her childhood trauma of discovering she was Jewish, only to find it recreated in *Austerlitz.* Bechhofer wrote about the experience for *The Sunday Times* in an essay saying she was 'stripped of my tragic past by a famous author.'[418]

In reverse of the above, in Sebald's nonfiction work, what was marketed as 'true' turned out to be highly fictionalised with Angier's discovery that Sebald had created biographies and stories for some of his real-life (often Jewish) subjects.[419] Shulevitz cautions against rushing to denounce Sebald because, she argues, Sebald wasn't only writing about Jewish people he was also writing about 'their absence—both from postwar Germany and, for those Jews who survived the Holocaust, from their own former selves.'[420] Prager agrees in his paper on 'The Good German as Narrator' in which he states, 'For Sebald, in both *Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*, the unspeakable point of origin for such testimony [about the holocaust] takes the form of a visual problem – a blind spot, or a hole – that cannot be visualized lying beneath the narrative's

[417] Angier, *Speak, Silence*, 285. There is also an interesting interview with Carole Angier in which she defends Sebald's decision to use Gebhart's diary in literary terms, saying Gebhart, 'had a very vivid way of describing this background and a lot of it was terrific, but only patches of it were terrific. So he used some of those terrific bits and didn't use all the other bits, so that his twenty pages are completely, concentratedly, as you say, so vivid and moving and extraordinary.' See: Chloe Garcia Roberts, 'On Sebald's "Self-Protective Porkies": An Interview with Carole Angier', *Harvard Review* (blog), 8 December 2021. https://www.harvardreview.org/content/an-interview-with-carole-angier-biographer-of-w-g-sebald/.
[418] Shulevitz, 'W. G. Sebald Ransacked Jewish Lives'.
[419] Carole Angier, 'Carole Angier on Fact and Fiction in W.G. Sebald's Work', Literary Hub, posted 18 July 2022, https://lithub.com/carole-angier-on-fact-and-fiction-in-w-g-sebalds-work/.
[420] Shulevitz, 'W. G. Sebald Ransacked Jewish Lives'.

tragic surface.'[421] Therefore, Shulevitz writes, to condemn Sebald for fabricating 'would be to miss the layers of meaning that complicate moral judgment.'[422] Also, through this method of borrowing and fabricating, he elucidated the shadowy borders of 'story' and 'truth'. Writing about how Sebald used photographs and documents in fictional texts, Angier states that they produced 'an unrivalled sense of reality—and a moment later, when we realise these stories are fictions, snatches it away: which makes us feel the elusiveness of truth more keenly than any simple fiction or nonfiction could do.'[423] However, even taking this into account, using, without permission, the experiences of real Jewish people and recreating them within fiction, and creating new biographies of Jewish people within nonfiction, is morally questionable. The people Sebald was writing about were victims of a terrifying regime, many of whom were stripped of their identities, branded with a number, and died in concentration camps. All plagiarism is problematic but a non-Jewish German author appropriating Jewish stories without acknowledgement—thus denying these people their real names and true identities—is a serious error of judgment.

Sebald 'borrowed' or 'appropriated' other's lives and created new biographies for real-life people. Bensley also fabricated several false biographies for himself and others and defrauded people through his stories for profit. Because of the similarities between Bensley's and Sebald's actions (separated only by motive, literary technique, and—dare I say it—class), I believed it important to distance myself from both Sebald's interpretation of cut-up *dérive* and his fictionalising of real-life characters. In short, I wanted my book to be 'true' and received by the reader as such. Despite this, the necessity of structuring a book in a way which would interest a reader, led to omissions. On advice of agent Jo Unwin's editor, Donna Greaves, I chose not to tell the reader how much information the narrator knew about Bensley at the start

[421] Brad Prager, 'The Good German as Narrator: On W. G. Sebald and the Risks of Holocaust Writing', *New German Critique*, no. 96 (2005): 75–102, 94.
[422] Shulevitz, 'W. G. Sebald Ransacked Jewish Lives'.
[423] Garner, 'A Biography of W.G. Sebald', 432.

of her research journey in order to increase dramatic tension. I also decided not to tell the real reason why my husband had a psychotic break which had to do with an experience my stepdaughter suffered. I left this out of the story because my stepdaughter did not want it mentioned and the weight of it, had I decided to include it, would have distorted the narrative. Omission is not fabrication. However, I did fabricate the character of Lily, Bensley's second wife. I created her as a 'ghost' who would appear to the narrator. She was a useful literary device who could ask the narrator questions and comment upon the action, thus allowing me to 'show' some parts of the story rather than 'tell' them. Unwilling to allow anything that could be seen as 'false' coming from the narrator's point of view, I made it clear that Lily was a figment of the narrator's imagination. Similarly, when recreating scenes and conversations from Edwardian Britain, I signalled to the reader that these episodes were a result of the narrator's active conscious imaginary world and thus were 'fiction'. Newspaper and other sources were cited in italics throughout. My depiction of the relentless nature of 'real-life' and my honesty about the emotional toll of traumatic events, aimed to give reassurance to the reader that the narrator's accounts were based in fact. This was important because the power of Bensley's original story was such that I believed it over a hundred years later. I wished to stand in opposition to the continuation of this fraud and felt it important to tell the truth about myself and my subjects with verifiable facts. Thematically, I wished to contrast my honesty against Bensley's lies. I also wanted to make an honest account of a modern middle-aged woman's life to evidence solidarity with Bensley's wives.

There is one more controversial aspect of psychogeography which influenced how I approached my praxis. Although it is a relatively new genre, stemming from Situationist work and only really becoming mainstream in the 1990s, it has often been accused of what Alexander Bridger called in his paper on 'Psychogeography and Feminist Methodology', 'masculinist

bias'.[424] Will Self, possibly the most famous proponent of the genre, has famously called psychogeographers a 'fraternity' of:

> middle-aged men in Gore-Tex, boots on suburban station platforms, politely requesting the operators of tea kiosks in mossy parks to fill our thermoses. […] Our prostates swell as we crunch over broken glass, [and we] are really only local historians with an attitude problem. Indeed, real, professional local historians view us as insufferably bogus and travelling – if anywhere at all – right up ourselves.[425]

Despite this unflattering self-portraiture, Self also believes that men are suited to this field because of 'certain natural and/or nurtured characteristics, that lead us to believe we have — or actually do inculcate us with superior visual-spatial skills to women.'[426] Even before Self wrote such simultaneously self-flagellating and swaggering statements, academics had noted how men commandeered the practice of geography. In 1993 Gillian Rose in her book, *Feminism and Geography*, argued that white, bourgeois heterosexual, and masculinist thinking has structured the way in which geography, as a discipline, claims to know space, place and landscape.[427] This translates into psychogeographic studies and in, 2001, Helen Scalway argued that Sinclair sees the city as a territorial conquest because of his distinctly masculine outlook:

> The street to a large extent remains what it always has been: inimical to women or anyone else cast as an Other and difficult for them to stroll (or loiter, other than with 'intent'). But Sinclair as a poet/walker/visionary in the masculine can, in spite of the

[424] Alexander John Bridger, 'Psychogeography and Feminist Methodology.', *Feminism & Psychology* 23, no. 3 (August 2013): 285–98, 285.
[425] Self, *Psychogeography*, 12.
[426] Self, *Psychogeography*, 12.
[427] Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 6.

famed multi-ironies of his writerly voice, set out to be one of the 'kings of the city'.[428]

This difficulty in 'strolling' or 'loitering' was explored in *Inside of the Mask*, shown by the conflict between the narrator's gendered responsibilities and her desire to escape her home; and the ease with which she was challenged by a 'cardigan guardian'.[429] Sinclair seems to have no such issues. Geoff Nicholson in an interview with Sinclair for his book *The Lost Art of Walking* asked him about his status as one of the 'kings of the city', citing young men who 'mooch around cities doing nothing much, claiming that they're flâneurs who are doing something really, you know, significant, and often taking Iain Sinclair as their role model.'[430] Sinclair responded to this question with humour—'at the very least skeptical [sic] about the craze he's started' and called psychogeography a 'franchise'. To which Nicholson responded, 'If Sinclair calls psychogeography a franchise, who gets the lease? Not women; not other.'[431] Lauren Elkin, author of *Flâneuse*, agrees in a direct swipe at Self: 'You don't need to crunch around in Gore-Tex to be subversive, if you're a woman. Just walk out your front door.'[432]

Charles Baudelaire, early proponent of *flânerie*, wrote in one of his short prose poems, *Crowds*, that the 'poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being able to be himself or someone else, as he chooses […] The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights'.[433] However, a woman walking in the city cannot always lose herself nor be able to choose how she is perceived. In *Flâneuse*, Elkin argues that the 'unfair and cruelly accurate' reason why women haven't traditionally been seen as *flâneurs* is because it is crucial for the

[428] Helen Scalway, 'The Territorialism of Ian Sinclair', *Psychogeography and Urban Research*, (online journal no longer available, 2002). Copy sent to the author in a word document by Scalway.
[429] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 132.
[430] Nicholson, *The Lost Art of Walking*, 93.
[431] Nicholson, *The Lost Art of Walking*, 93-4.
[432] Elkin, *Flâneuse*, 20.
[433] Charles Baudelaire, 'Les Foules', in *Petits Poèmes En Prose*, vol. iv, iv vols (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1869), 31.

'flâneur to be functionally invisible' and women, on the streets, are subject to the male gaze. Ironically, it is sometimes the male flâneur who provides this gaze.[434] Elizabeth Munson, in her paper on women walking before the 1930s, agrees, 'For the male flâneur, walking down the street involved watching others; for the middle-class woman, it meant watching herself. She had to make sure that her body did as she told it to do and that nobody else noticed when her body transgressed its assigned spaces.'[435]

It, therefore, as noted in Chapter One and Two of this commentary, took a brave woman to walk in previous generations—some might say a foolhardy one. Historically, women who walked without a gendered purpose (such as going to the market or for the purposes of childcare) constituted a handful of the population. A few decades before my research period (primarily the time of Bensley's walk from January 1908 to November 1908), a few women participated in the forgotten craze of *pedestriennes*. In this sport, long-distance walks were completed for prize money.[436] Although these walks were mainly attempted by men, Derek Martin, expert on pedestrianism, calculates that, between 1809 and 1908, at least 118 women attempted, completed, or claimed to have finished some version of a long-distance endurance walk for a wager.[437] These women came from all sections of society. However, despite the seeming egalitarian nature of these walks, the male gaze was firmly in place. The women, many of whom came from working class backgrounds, proved popular with the crowds, especially when they copied the dress of the American Mrs. Amelia Bloomer and wore 'bloomers'. Publicity included the chance to see this 'style of dress'.[438] By 1908, the practice of

[434] Elkin, *Flâneuse*, 13.
[435] Elizabeth Munson, 'Walking on the Periphery: Gender and the Discourse of Modernization', *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 1 (1 October 2002): 63–75, 67.
[436] This type of long-distance walk was inspired by Captain Barclay who in 1809 walked one mile every hour for 1,000 successive hours (42 days) for a wager of 1,000 guineas. Copy-cat 'Barclay Matches' became popular and lucrative. See: Derek Martin, 'Pedestriennes: Nineteenth Century Female Professional Walkers', Playing Pasts, 13 March 2017, https://www.playingpasts.co.uk/articles/gender-and-sport/pedestriennes-nineteenth-century-female-professional-walkers/.
[437] Derek Martin. 'A Short History of the Barclay Match. 1809-1909'. YouTube. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqgaHjBFCJo
[438] 'Victoria Gardens - Horfield', *Bristol Mercury*, 2 September 1884.

Pedestriennes had already given way to female-only indoor athletics with a focus on amateurism which precluded many working-class women.[439] In my research into Bensley's walk I found only one woman who was 'long-distance walking'. She was a French woman, Madame Gruard, who was, according to *The Winchester News,* in Kentucky twelve years after her set-off date. However, Madame Gruard was afforded the protection of a male companion as she was walking with her husband—the story being that they'd set off on the day after their wedding in 1896.[440] Mabel Reed, the third of Bensley's wives, did partake in some parts of his long walk with him. However, this was in the role of wife and supporter. She was also subject to public (usually male) gaze as the wife who had 'married him sight unseen'. Kate and Lily, Bensley's first and second wives, weighed down by poverty and family responsibilities, would most likely never have walked without a gendered purpose. Therefore, it was my duty as a biographer of Bensley's wives to walk in ways they could not. Thus, in my planning, I intended to walk more than I did in my final iteration—the irony being that it was gendered responsibilities and social restrictions which prevented me from doing so.

The issue of women walking alone is not only an historic one. In *Perceptions of Personal Safety,*[441] UK census data gathered in 2021, half of all women felt unsafe walking alone in the dark near their home, compared to one in seven men; and four out of five women reported feeling unsafe alone in the dark in a park or other open space, compared to two out of five men. Also 44% of women aged 16 to 34 years experienced catcalls, whistles, unwanted sexual comments or jokes in public, and 29% had felt like they were being followed. Disabled people

[439] Martin, 'Pedestriennes: Nineteenth Century Female Professional Walkers.'
[440] 'Walk Around World on Honeymoon', *The Winchester News,* 15 October 1908.
[441] 'Perceptions of Personal Safety and Experiences of Harassment, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics', accessed 19 October 2023, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/perceptionsofpersonalsafetyandexperiencesofharassmentgreatbritain/2to27june2021.

felt significantly less safe overall as did ethnic minorities.[442] Although 12% of women my age (54), experienced 'being insulted or shouted at by a stranger in public',[443] as a white heterosexual middle-aged cis woman, I felt little threat walking in my chosen areas. However, in *Inside the Mask*, I recount a moment in which another woman confronted me for standing outside her house and taking a picture:

> 'You didn't look like you were a burglar, but one can never be sure.' […] If I had looked like a burglar (a man, say) she might not have been brave enough to confront me. Women are more easily policed.[444]

Even with my privileges, the act of being in public as a lone woman can be challenged with ease.

Bridger writes that during psychogeographical practise, 'the gendered body is […] like a 'vehicle' through which the person experiences and makes sense of their relation both to others and to place.'[445] Women, subject not only to the male gaze but harassment and the awareness of personal danger, will, therefore, have a different experience from their male counterparts undertaking the same walk. Because of the threat of harassment and physical threat, women may also self-limit the types of places they will enter. So, for example, a woman might not have contemplated writing something like Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital a walk around the M25,* because he forays into industrial parks and abandoned wastelands. Or, had a woman taken on the project, she would, most likely, have had a different (more frightening) experience than that described by Sinclair. This would be particularly true if the writer were

[442] Although not stated in the summary on the government website, diving into the metadata of the study, shows that people described as Mixed/Multiple, Asian, Black/Black British and Other Ethnicities felt much less safe than their white counterparts. (This section of the data doesn't say if these people are men or women.) Nor did the survey ask for trans identification or sexual orientations.
[443] 'Perceptions of Personal Safety'.
[444] McQueen, *Inside the Mask*, 99.
[445] Bridger, 'Psychogeography and Feminist Methodology', 285.

from an ethnic minority, disabled, or trans. A long journey might also not be possible for everyone: as evidenced by my inability to travel because of family responsibilities and Covid restrictions.

Because of justified fear of certain environments another question arises: can women participate in the type of *flânerie* in which Benjamin's 'dialectical images' are possible? Bassett thinks not. He argues that the participant in psychogeography, particular the female or 'other', cannot always adopt an 'ultrareceptive posture' necessary for *flânerie*.[446] Because states of being such as 'ultrareceptive' are highly subjective and difficult to quantify, it is impossible to verify this hypothesis, but it is certain, given the census evidence above that women find themselves being hyper-aware within social situations which is inimical to the prototypical relaxed state of the *flâneur*. Add government restrictions and the fear of spreading or gaining Covid, this statement becomes even more true. This does not mean, however, that women are incapable of psychogeographical acts. Nor that their individual circumstance necessarily precludes psychogeographical research. In *Letters*, as has been discussed, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote psychogeographically on her three-month trip through Northern Europe. Virginia Woolf, on a much shorter journey, also walked and wrote in a way we would now see as psychogeographical. A prime example of her excursions into *flânerie* is her 1927 essay 'Street Haunting'.[447] This twelve-page essay describes how the writer steps onto a London street at twilight, thus shedding 'the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers.'[448] Losing all sense of herself, she turns into an invisible *flâneur* or, in Woolf's words 'an enormous eye' which 'is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure.'[449] In *Flaneuse,* Elkin argues that 'Street Haunting' is, 'an attempt to claim an

[446] Keith Bassett, 'Walking as an Aesthetic Practice', 399.
[447] Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', in *Collected Essays*, vol. 4, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1967).
[448] Woolf, 'Street Haunting', 155.
[449] Woolf, 'Street Haunting', 156.

ungendered place in the city by walking through it.'[450] Woolf becomes androgynous, an eye only, as she steps into the streets and thus, freed from the male gaze is able to be 'aware of the invisible [gendered] boundaries of the city' and 'can challenge them.'[451] What's more, the structure of the essay takes the *dérive* form that was to be so popular with modern psychogeographers. Woolf begins with the premise of needing a pencil; steps out into the street; thinks about her house and its possessions, including a bowl bought in Mantua, which inspires an anecdote about Lloyd George. Bringing the reader back to the street, she writes about the beauty of London, remembers a boot shop in which a woman with dwarfism was being fitted for shoes; thinks about the homeless; goes window shopping, etc. At one point she writes, 'It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter's evening; we are standing in the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June? What could be more absurd?'[452] Thus, she can experience and produce Benjamin's 'dialectical image' from, it seems, an 'ultrareceptive posture'.[453] I also believe that, even if she had not achieved an 'ultrareceptive' state, her psychogeography would be just as valid as a male counterpart's. If the practise of psychogeography is about 'the [effect of] geographical environment […] on the emotions and behaviour of individuals',[454] then it is of great importance to include women's experiences even if they are not always capable of 'ultrareceptive posture'. Psychogeography is also highly subjective as the researcher is simultaneously the 'vehicle', the receptacle of experience, and the interpreter. The individualistic nature of this, needs no over-riding caveats on who and who is not capable of the psychogeographic act. Nor does the length of one's journey dictate what is psychogeographical research and what is not.

[450] Elkin, *Flâneuse*, 288.
[451] Elkin, *Flâneuse*, 288.
[452] Woolf, 'Street Haunting', 161.
[453] Bassett, 'Walking as an Aesthetic Practice', 399.
[454] Debord, 'A Critique of Urban Geography', 8.

As part of my practise of 'action research', I also used re-enactment as a tool to better understand Bensley's experience of walking.[455] Although Ludmilla Jordanova in her 2000 book on *History in Practice,* comments that re-enactment as a historical research method has been largely misunderstood and dismissed by academics, the practice is now becoming more widely accepted.[456] In a 2010 introduction to a collection of essays on performing heritage, Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd argue that affective experience, that is bodily engagement with historical 'otherness', is an authentic research method in which the historian experiences a clearer understanding of situations and place than they can by only researching the archives.[457] Jerome de Groot, using examples from contemporary popular culture, believes re-enactment allows for hindsight and enables participants and audience to comprehend then in the now.[458] It is this 'comprehending the then in the now' which was attractive to me as action-researcher. Accordingly, my first plan when I conceived my work as a piece of psychogeography was to use re-enactment to recreate parts of Bensley's walk. That is, I wished to wear a helmet, push a pram, and walk from Trafalgar Square to Dartford, as Bensley did on 1st January 1908. I also made plans to walk on the South coast, in Devon and the Midlands. I considered that re-enactment, in the context of this research and its autoethnographic approach, would be vital as a mode of knowledge-production. Re-enactment would allow for exploration of psychogeographical liminal spaces in which, through 'dialectical images', past and present arrive simultaneously. Due to Covid, this plan in its full extent became impossible. It could have been done, however, on a smaller scale over a few hours but, after analysing Bensley's walk in the context of a Situationist *détournement and* exploring the role of reenactment as a

[455] Although I also dressed as Lily, Bensley's second wife, this was not a reenactment in the true sense of the word. I would more properly term the experience 'dressing up'. The process led to deeper autoethnographical understanding about self and genre roles but shed little light on the experiences of Lily herself. McQueen, *Inside the Mask,* 113-118.
[456] Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practise* (London: Arnold, 2000), 164.
[457] Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, eds., *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 5.
[458] Jerome de Groot, *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 197.

historical research practice, I came to the conclusion, discussed below, that to walk as Bensley would be antithetical to my aims.

There is a subversive quality to Bensley's original walk and one, which at first glance, could be interpreted as a *détournement*: that is, one of Debord's practical applications for disrupting the 'spectacle'. The literal translation from French for *détournement* is 'rerouting' or 'hijacking'. According to Douglas Holt in his paper 'Cultural Strategy', *détournement* is when an artist or group of artists turns 'expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself.'[459] This has been articulated in such modern movements as 'culture jamming' in which memes, among other methods, are created 'jamming up or blocking the flow of commercial messages.'[460] Culture jamming does not construct new works that allude to the original, but rather appropriates recognizable elements to create a new and antagonistic message. Examples can be found in the work of Banksy who, among many other *détournement*, created nine images on the Israeli West Bank wall which depict children playing and views which could be seen if the wall did not exist.[461] In this case, Banksy used existing material (of the wall and views) and juxtaposed images to engender alternative possibilities.

Due to the nature of Bensley's costume, redolent of popular myths about Knights defending Englishness, and his unexpected appearance in towns and villages, it could be argued that his performative act was a form of *détournement*. Bensley, one might say, startled residents out of their 'capitalist sleep'.[462] However, although 'the spectacle' refers to the whole landscape of capitalist societies, Bensley's costume and walk, rather than being a *détournement*, is a

[459] Douglas Holt, *Cultural Strategy: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2010), 252.
[460] Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink, *Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance* (New York: University Press, 2017), 7.
[461] 'The Segregation Wall, Palestine, 2005', Banksy Explained (blog), accessed 5 May 2021, https://banksyexplained.com/the-segregation-wall-palestine-2005/.
[462] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 7.

demonstration of 'the spectacle' in its purist individualist form. Debord states in Thesis 23 of *The Society of the Spectacle*:

> 'The oldest social specialization, the specialization of power, is at the root of the spectacle. […] It is the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society in front of itself, where all other expression is banished. Here the most modern is also the most archaic.'[463]

In choosing an archaic costume and creating a persona of a landed gentleman, Bensley is a walking advertisement for himself (the producer and the product) and for unjust hierarchies. Bensley, by both setting up a subversive image and then using it to make money, was participating in 'recuperation' in which subversive ideas are appropriated by mainstream media, rendering them safe and commodified.[464] Debord writes that the 'spectacle', 'Like a factitious god, it engenders itself and makes its own rules.'[465] Within this framework, the tenacity of Bensley's tale can thus be seen through a neo-religious framework: his image was revered and mythologised because producer and product reinforced and validated the spectacle. The package Bensley created, in all its dream-like quality, induced in his viewers' 'sleep'. In Debord's words, Bensley's 'message is: "What appears is good; what is good appears"'.[466] Bensley's control over the narration of his walk, the lies he repeated in lieu of conversation, and his 'monopoly of appearances, [his] manner of appearing without allowing any reply.'[467] demonstrates that Bensley's walk can be seen, not as a *détournement*, but part of 'the spectacle' itself.

[463] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 7.
[464] Thomas Bunyard, 'Relevance in Obsolescence: Recuperation and Temporality in the Work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International', *Fungiculture*, no 1 (2004), 118-136, 132.
[465] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 9.
[466] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 4.
[467] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 4.

Therefore, *détournement*, in its proper sense, challenges the status quo as can be seen by example of the re-enactment work of artist Jeremy Deller. In 2001, he created a re-enactment of what has come to be known as the Battle of Orgreave in which, on 18th June 1984, a violent confrontation occurred between picketing miners and the police. Seventy-one picketers were charged with riot (at the time, punishable with life imprisonment) and twenty-four with violent disorder. Deller recreated the scenes in the same location with eight-hundred historical re-enactors and two-hundred former miners who had been part of the original conflict. On his website, Deller describes this as 'digging up a corpse and giving it a proper post-mortem, or as a thousand-person crime re-enactment.'[468] It was, in other words, a *détournement*. Fourteen years after Orgreave's re-enactment, what became obvious to the people who had reenacted the scene, was confirmed by the Independent Police Complaints Commission, in that there was 'evidence of excessive violence by police officers' and 'a false narrative from police exaggerating violence by miners.'[469]

Deller has been described as a having 'a proto-Situationist affinity' by Jerome de Groot. In De Groot's notes accompanying his interview with Deller, he writes that Deller's '"historical" practice […] is interested in challenging the hegemony of the official archive, celebrating the complications of memory in the now, and suggesting new modes of communication between subcultures with their own 'folk' traditions.'[470] So, too, did I wish my re-enactment to challenge the original narrative of Bensley's walk which is, due to its oral communication form, a type of 'folk tradition'. De Groot continues, 'Orgreave presents history, archive and memory as something very fluid, and the artist/participant's intervention into it as

[468] Jeremy Deller, 'The Battle of Orgreave', Jeremy Deller website, accessed 26 October 2023, https://www.jeremydeller.org/TheBattleOfOrgreave/TheBattleOfOrgreave_Video.php.
[469] David Conn, 'South Yorkshire Interim Police Chief Welcomes Orgreave Inquiry', *The Guardian*, 6 May 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/may/06/south-yorkshire-interim-police-chief-welcomes-orgreave-inquiry.
[470] Jerome de Groot, '"I Am Not a Trained Historian. I Improvise"', *Rethinking History* 16, no. 4 (December 2012): 587–95, 588.

something dynamic, problematic and upsetting.'[471] Deller's use of miners who were present at the original battle promotes a sense of reality, creating an epistemologically problematic connection between the participant/viewer/critic and the re-enactment. In taking part in a reenactment dressed as Bensley, I wished to explore this problematic connection. As a single reenactor, I would have been taking on the role of participant and critic: simultaneously inside and outside the action and thus challenge my self-created imagery of Bensley. By understanding the complexity of his walk in a helmet, I hoped to replace the myth with a more realistic interpretation.

When asked about the purpose of *Orgreave*, Deller responds, 'it was not meant to make people feel good about the strike or feel closure, it was meant to make people angry again. If anything, it was meant to act as a recreation of a crime.'[472] As Bensley was under probation while undertaking his walk, and as he fraudulently employed a narrative to obtain money, his walk can be seen as a literal crime. His treatment of the women in his life, both before and after the walk, was immoral from a historic and modern perspective and, as he was bigamous, illegal. In Debord's terms, Bensley, is a representation of the 'general shift of *having* into *appearing*.'[473] Bensley never 'had' what he claimed; and only 'appeared' to do so, yet his 'appearance' was accepted as true because, within the 'society of the spectacle', appearing to have is more valid than actually having. Debord writes, 'When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings—figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behaviour.'[474] Debord terms the acceptance of such images as 'banalization' of culture.[475] He writes, 'The agent of the spectacle who is put on stage as a star is the opposite of the individual; he is as clearly the enemy of his own individuality as of the

[471] de Groot, '"I Am Not a Trained Historian"', 591.
[472] de Groot, '"I Am Not a Trained Historian"', 592.
[473] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 5.
[474] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 6.
[475] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 23.

individuality in others.'[476] Thus, by Debord's logic, Bensley's participation in the 'spectacle' not only damaged others, but damaged himself too. This I doubt. I did wonder, however, that in aping Bensley's journey dressed as him, whether I would be participating in a spectacle which had become, for me, the symbol of the damage he wreaked on his wives.

Ultimately, I did not want to be an apologist for Bensley's actions, whether through writing him as a main character or aping his walk. Thus, I came to understand that the act of 'homage' was, in itself, problematic. To dress as him would, without textual information supplied to the viewer, have celebrated his actions; it would be, in Debord's words, 'a distorting objectification of the producer[s].'[477] Although I wanted to walk for the women in his life who had no such opportunity to go on an adventure like Bensley's (because of gendered oppression and the poverty Bensley created), to do so dressed as him would be oppositional to my message. Bridger writes, 'An important part of a feminist psychogeographical methodology would be to consider one's role in the research in relation to embodiment and 'gendered subjectivity'.[478] My ultimate decision to make my long walk without costume and as myself was, therefore, to walk within my 'gendered subjectivity' and reclaim Bensley's walk for the 'other', in, what Solnit in *Wanderlust* calls, 'an act of resistance to the mainstream.'[479] I would 'be' both Bensley on this walk, and a middle-aged woman walking in honour of his wives. As such, during the walk, I was (or at least felt) unremarkable: a person in a crowd only. Because of my age, my nondescript clothes, and the colour of my skin, *flânerie* was possible in a way it was not to Bensley in his costume, nor to his young wives due to their age, sex, gendered responsibilities and the social constructs of the time. De Groot writes, 'The ways in which history might be

[476] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 24.
[477] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 5.
[478] Alexander John Bridger, 'Psychogeography and Feminist Methodology', *Feminism & Psychology* 23, no. 3 (August 2013): 285–98, 294. He references the term 'gendered subjectivity'. See: Rosalind Gill. 'Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising', in *Gender and Psychology., Vol. IV.*, ed. Viv Burr (New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 191–217, 40.
[479] Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*.

reperformed, remembered affectively and bodily, lead to some very interesting recalibrations of the self in the now.'[480] Re-enactment, therefore, just like psychogeography, allows for performative exploration of history, memory, and self. Dressing as myself, placed my role as researcher firmly in centre stage and oppositional to Bensley's reasons for walking and his erasure of the women in his life. Relaying his story alongside my own ordinary life, whether I could walk far or not, was a far better reflection of the 'truth' of my own and my female subject's lives than some grand gesture involving a miles-long walk in costume.

Holding the idea of the researcher as central, being aware of liminality, and analysing and recognising states of being were prime modes of functionality throughout my research. Self-awareness, empathy and imagination were sensibilities I kept with me while stationary, walking, or performing as another. Ultimately, *Inside the Mask*, is proof that the theory and practice of psychogeography (and its cousins autoethnography and re-enactment) is not only a system suitable for a long walk but can be employed in restrictive circumstances. *Dérive*, *flânerie*, and *detournements* are not bound by space, rather they are states of mind in which I, and by extension all those restricted by circumstance, can explore history, memory, gender, genre, narrative, and self.

[480] de Groot, '"I Am Not a Trained Historian."'

Conclusion

What was once a story about Harry Bensley became, through the theory and praxis of feminist archival research and psychogeography, an auto/biographical text with Bensley's wives and me at its centre. Bensley was no longer the primary focus but instead a catalyst by which the boundaries between truth, lies, fact, fiction, past and present could be re-examined. Using the historical archive and personal memory, I investigated 'competing' stories, 'true' stories, and stories submerged, subverted, or falsified by familial, patriarchal or other influences. Throughout, I embraced the blurring of boundaries between traditional archive research, autoethnography, psychogeography and re-enactment, thereby inviting a re-evaluation of these techniques, and a reconsideration of who can perform them and how.

Through critical examination of texts by Elkin, Kempe, Masud, Myerson, Sinclair, Sebald, Wollstonecraft and Woolf, I found inspiration and useful parallels which I incorporated into my final draft. Research into philosophers Benjamin and Debord, alongside critical thinkers and practitioners of autoethnography, psychogeography and re-enactment provided me with tools to reject binary oppositions between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others. Through these methods, I was enabled to collapse the boundaries of time—merging real-life events, memory, reflection, history, fiction and biography. The permeable boundaries of self and memory were questioned and the role of narrative as a force for good and bad was examined. Using a definition of psychogeography which did not necessarily involve long journeys, I was able to interrogate both the archive and the effect of environment on myself and subjects during lockdown restrictions.

My memoir is part of a continuum of audacious generically innovative female writing, begun, in the English language by the difficult character of Margery Kempe. She, like many of

my subjects who followed, recreated herself, through writing, to elucidate personal history, trauma, and societal wrongs. In doing so, she counters masculinist narratives about pilgrims—voicing previously submerged and subverted truths about female worship and pilgrimage. In expostulating against the church and its hierarchies, she placed herself in great danger. Autobiographical writing was, and to some extent still is, subversive simply because of the gender of the writer. We have imagined a reader beyond our social confines; we have dared to express the difficulties of everyday to a society which often expects women to not only conform but to express happiness about their situation.

Kempe and Wollstonecraft also demonstrated how walking beyond gendered responsibilities was an act of bravery. To do so was an unintended political act in which the walkers were maligned and put in physical danger. Despite the examples of Elkin, Masud, and other modern female psychogeographers, to walk as a woman in the twenty-first century, beyond the bright lights of a town centre, is perceived as dangerous according to the government figures quoted in Chapter Four. Even now, for women to write about such walks, particularly using psychogeography, is to disrupt a status quo. As Scalway wrote to me in an email on 11th November 2019, 'there is now more awareness of [gender bias in psychogeography], but I think the issues do not change – indeed in many ways they seem to call more fiercely than ever for attention.'[481]

My research, therefore, initially demanded I walked like Bensley did, reclaiming these long walks for the wives he treated so badly. Personal circumstances and a world-wide pandemic allowed me to complete only one long walk. However, by interrogating the archive through a feminist lens, I came to see that making Bensley's walk the focus of my story was, in any case, undesirable. I no longer wanted to simply concentrate on this eleven-month period of his life, where he could be conceivably viewed as heroic. Instead, I wished to tackle the

[481] Helen Scalway, correspondent, email message to the author, 'Re: Journal Articles', 11 November 2019.

whole breadth of his life—particularly those times in which I could give the women in his life narrative attention. Yet because psychogeography allowed for the collapsing of boundaries, necessary for a narrative which investigated the borders between truth, lies, fact and fiction, I was still keen to use this method. I therefore adapted the practice of psychogeography to include short walks, stationary research and forays into the imagination, at all times utilising *dérive* to collapse the boundaries of time, genre, and self. This led to a reinvigoration of my practice and a freedom to explore not only the thematic boundaries of falsehoods and lies emanating from the Bensley story but the rules I had set myself as a writer. Within a looser definition of psychogeography, imagination played a vital role in both the creation of the work and the research methods I undertook. In freeing myself from the 'rules' of psychogeography, I was empowered to discover other unusual research forms, such as dressing as Lily and having her as a 'ghost' companion. The resulting project, therefore, is a demonstration of how psychogeography can be carried out by those restricted by societal rules and/or family responsibilities; and how a looser definition of genres can lead to an imaginative freedom for the writer, reinvigorating praxis.

At the end of *King Kong Theory,* Virginie Despentes writes, 'Of course it's difficult to be a woman. Fears, constraints, being commanded to silence, called to a long-discredited line of order – a whole carnival of pathetic and sterile limitations.'[482] Kempe and Wollstonecraft dared to speak out even in times which were much more restricted by cultural expectations laid on their sex than today. Indeed, because of the 'free' life she led, Wollstonecraft was seen as a prostitute who deserved death to at least one contemporaneous writer, Timothy Newlight.[483] Despite the idea that women were not worthy of autobiography or hagiography, they were

[482] Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, trans. S. Benson (New York: Feminist Press, 2009), 136.
[483] Timothy Newlight, 'The Adventures of Timothy Newlight, A Votary of Godwin's Philosophy' in *The Historical, Biographical, Literary, and Scientific Magazine, for February 1799,* ed. Robert Bisset (London: George Cawthorn, 1799), 30, https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/9200143/BibliographicResource_2000069357259

emboldened, in their desire to communicate, to find new ways of writing about their history and beliefs. In doing so, both created new genres. Although autobiography is an accepted form of writing for women today, to write as a mother still leads to controversy as demonstrated by the reception of works by Cusk, Nelson and Myerson. Through dissemination of these texts, I was able to locate my praxis as part of a continuum of female autobiographic writing which uses unusual narrative structures and genre experimentation to examine 'competing' stories, 'true' stories, and stories submerged, subverted, or falsified by familial, patriarchal or other influences.

Wollstonecraft, Myerson, and Sebald were conduits by which I was able to explore the blurred boundaries of truth and fiction. Each analysed text held truths, fictions, and deliberate tricky omissions. Their praxis demonstrated the literal truth of the tale wasn't always paramount when attempting to convey difficult and nuanced real-life emotions. Their careful mixing of both autobiography and fiction, through form and structure, also led to insights about the nature of narrative, fiction, lies and truth. Wollstonecraft pioneered an autofictional approach to ask how she (or at least an avatar of herself) could exist within a world wishing to control a woman's thoughts and actions. Myerson and Sebald experimented with presenting facts as fiction not to confuse but to pose personal, political, and philosophical questions. I too used a mixture of fact and fiction and examined submerged stories to ask questions: What effect does narrative have on the believer? Where are they safest—in the truth or in the story?

Masud, Myerson and Sebald collapse temporality to show how time is not experienced as linear. As Sebald writes in *Austerlitz*, 'time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously.'[484] Using Benjamin's theory of a 'dialectical image' alongside the Situationists' notion of 'the uncanny', gave me a

[484] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 144.

practical research tool in the form of psychogeography to enable the collapsing of time within my creative text. Houses, streets, clothes, and statues became pegs from which I could hang research, memories, stories and myth: collapsing time and reality. Through partial abandonment of temporality, I explored the seismic effect of Bensley's behaviour both on the lives of his wives and on my life. I did this in two ways: firstly, by paralleling our lives, both firmly within their temporal spheres; and, secondly, by attempting to show that, although these events happened over a hundred years apart, they were also happening simultaneously in the now. Imagination has no temporal restrictions. Thus, Lily was born as a 'living' demonstration of the past visiting the future. Similarly, I wished to show how two conflicting stories can exist simultaneously. Therefore, the image of Bensley walking away in his iron mask remained for much of my narrative, even when his motives had been disproved. For the narrator, he was still a symbol of freedom and anonymity. She imagined his walk as a Debordian *détournement* even while she understood he was a fraudster whose actions could be labelled a 'recoupment of the spectacle'. Both the knowledge of his wrongdoings and the myth he had instigated existed simultaneously. Mythic symbolism was also employed to connect Bensley's original story to folk monomyths. I wished to demonstrate their power over the human imagination: how we believe a story despite evidence. That we believe myths *and* know the truth. That we are capable of holding conflicting ideas simultaneously.

Throughout my questioning of narrative, of who has the right to tell story and whether memory is reliable, I was also able to explore my role as writer. In a 1972 essay, Adrienne Rich writes about the female writer/reader:

> she meets the image of woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salome, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed,

> drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at the desk trying to put words together.[485]

Since then, as part of their feminist practice, authors using autobiography and its hybrids, such as Bechdel, Cusk, Heti, and Myerson, have embedded within their texts their personal struggles with the practice of writing and how it impacts the other roles in their lives. In doing so they demonstrate the whole person, which includes woman, mother, daughter and writer. Because of the nature of the Bensley story which erased the women in his life, I, too, wanted to create a narrator who embodied, and examined, all the above roles—a 'whole' person whose responsibilities came into conflict with her desire to research and write. This conflict was exacerbated by Covid restrictions and family trauma, and so I was fully able to explore the competing nature of these roles within my creative nonfiction text. During the writing of this book, my life, like Cusk's had 'the seething atmosphere of an untended garden.'[486] Writing, at once, was both a partial cause of the chaos because it pulled my attention away from the family, and my salvation, for the same reason. Demonstrating the difficulties of writing with family responsibilities, allowed me to examine the conflicts existent in my own life and that of other female authors. Indeed, circumstance forced a collapsing of the boundaries between the roles of writer, mother, wife and citizen.

Wollstonecraft championed 'imagination' as a source for 'reason'. I also wanted to demonstrate how imagination can be a vital research tool and a conduit for understanding. This I demonstrated through my biographical work on Bensley—imagining what life was like for him and his wives through psychogeographical methods, dressing-up, re-enactment and plain old daydreaming. Imagination, when it removes the participant from their daily lives, can be a

[485] Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English* 34, no. 1 (1972): 18–30, 21.
[486] Cusk, *A Life's Work*, 133.

numbing source of comfort for the creator and can, when the strength of imagination clouds truth, overpower reason. We occupy the space between the brutality of the real world and the excitement and dream state of the stories we create for ourselves and others. Ultimately, I discovered that the story protects you from the truth and the truth protects you from the story. Both are necessary and vital to the human experience. Without fiction, the truth for many people is frightening—we live on a dying, dangerous planet, the only known beings in the universe. Without truth, we can be prey to fraudsters like Bensley, condemned to live a life of poverty. Therefore, not only can narrative and truth exist simultaneously, they must. We have to juggle both versions of life, clutching one then the other, sometimes holding both in our palms. When I was a child, I lived with the knowledge that my brother had disruptive behaviours, was in pain, and was often rushed to the hospital. I also believed the story that we were a happy, safe family and no harm could befall us. The truth wasn't bearable without the story. The story was the only possible solution for mental survival, yet it wouldn't have been needed if it wasn't for the truth. They are symbiotic. And, like the situation with my brother, the story of Bensley existed symbiotically with the narrative of my 'true' life. One impacted the other and, for me, 'real life' wasn't bearable without imagination and without 'story'.

When it comes to evaluating my narrative, I must bear the above in mind. Balancing all the material I had from the outset, would have been difficult in any circumstance. Life threw so many curve balls that it seemed, at times, that my intention to write my life alongside Bensley and his wives would become impossible. Indeed, in its final iteration *Inside the Mask* could be seen, like Wollstonecraft's work, as 'a ragbag' in which I attempted to stuff too much life.[487] Perhaps the easiest solution would have been to scrap all autobiography and simply write an historical fiction or even a straight biography. Had a worldwide pandemic not struck right in the middle of this project, much about the project and my process might have been very

[487] Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 95.

different. In an alternative world I might have explored the 'long walk' of Bensley more. I also might have had more and easier access to archives and places of interest in more scattered locations. The intense pressure-cooker of family life which was heightened one hundred-fold by lockdown would have played out differently and so would have taken on a different emphasis in my narrative—possibly a less central role, and perhaps the Edwardian historical and social elements may have had greater centrality in my process and narrative. Yet, if art is to mimic life at all, it should reflect at least some of the chaos. And, ironically, it was this chaos caused by family trauma and Covid restrictions, which most enabled me to explore the theme of competing narratives. The narrator's true-life and memories were, in a sense, submerged stories which competed and ultimately overwhelmed Bensley's story. That is, true life competed with Bensley's faux narrative and/or his biography and won out. Imagination squeezed itself into the cracks of life and a new type of auto/bio/fiction emerged.

The narrative as it stands is historically contingent on the 2020-21 period which was, in itself, an extraordinary historical moment, and my desire for release from the confinement and fear brought about by the pandemic was an inevitable part of a narrative in which Harry Bensley's not-very-true legend of a walk around the world took on a particular timbre and quality. I expressed my life by weaving together Bensley's archive with my own family and personal trauma through psychogeography and fiction. For me, the author, they are now one holistic narrative: to unpick one is to unpick all. I, therefore, present this work as it stands: a demonstration of the chaotic nature of life; a life in which stories are fuel for hope and despair; and a 'true' account of how writing and research can be both curtailed and enriched by circumstance.

For five years, I have been co-existing with Bensley and his wives. I brought Lily to life to help me create the story. She both existed and didn't—long dead but alive on the page and in my imagination. She kept me going through lockdown, allowed me to retreat into a safe

imaginary space. This dissertation, both in its critical and creative components, affirms the power of the imagination and is a homage to all those women battling to have their voices heard.

Appendices

Appendix 1

The rules for Bensley's walk from Steve Holland, *Iron Mask. The Story of Harry Bensley's 'Walking around the World' Hoax* (Wivenhoe: Bear Alley Books, 2019).

- Bensley was never to be identified.
- Bensley must first walk through 169 British cities and towns in a specific order.
- to prove his visit, Bensley had to collect a signature from a local prominent resident in each specified British town.
- After that he would begin a tour of 18 countries, also in a pre-specified order.
- Bensley was to finance himself, starting off with just £1.00 and could support himself only by selling picture cards about himself.
- Only a change of underclothes was allowed as baggage.
- He was to complete the journey wearing an iron mask weighing 2 kg (4.5 lb) from a suit of armour;
- He was to push a pram the entire journey.
- Another man was to accompany him to see that he fulfilled the conditions at all times.
- On the journey he was to find someone who would agree to marry him without seeing his face.

Appendix 2

Archival Evidence was gathered on site visits to Thetford, South Norwood, Croydon, and London as detailed in *Inside the Mask*. Those either not mentioned in the creative nonfiction text or significant because of the amount of material gathered, include:

- Ancient House Museum, 21 Whitehart Street, Thetford, IP24 1AA. Website: https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/ancient-house. The museum held information on Charles Burrell and Thetford life. The curator shared some (false) information about Bensley with me, saying he had been part of their exhibition on the First World War.
- Thetford Town Hall's new offices. Thetford Town Council, 2 Cage Lane, Thetford, IP24 2DS. Website: https://thetfordtowncouncil.gov.uk. From there, kind permission was granted to see Robert Burrell's portrait in Thetford's old Town Hall. The Guildhall, Cage Lane, The Carnegie, Thetford, IP24 2DS.
- Suffolk Record Office was also at their old building at the time of research. Suffolk Archives, 77 Raingate Street, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 2AR. Much of the material I used, including maps of the area and books on Thetford life, has now been moved to Suffolk Archive, 131 Fore Street, Ipswich, IP4 1LN. Website: https://www.suffolkarchives.co.uk/.
- As detailed in *Inside the Mask*, Thetford Library provided information about Charles Hubbard, Bensley's employer at the time of the arson. Thetford Library, Raymond Street, Thetford. IP24 2EA.

- Essex Records Office too is mentioned in *Inside the Mask* and provided council minutes from when Bensley was a councillor. Essex Records Office, Wharf Road, Chelmsford, CM2 6YT. Website: https://www.essexrecordoffice.co.uk.

As much of my research took place during lockdown restrictions during Covid, I am grateful to the workers at institutions who responded to my queries via email. These places include:

- Museum of Croydon for expertise about the workhouse where Harry Bensley Senior died. https://museumofcroydon.com.
- London Metropolitan Archives for information on Willesden Court where Bensley was first prosecuted and sent to jail for a year. https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/london-metropolitan-archives.
- Moyse's Hall Museum for information on Edwardian Pram. https://www.moyseshall.org/.
- Norwich Castle Collections for information about the jewels Bensley claimed were stored at the castle. https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/norwich-castle.
- The Church Army for records regarding the people they helped and the location of their head office (neither of which they were able to provide). https://churcharmy.org.
- Hertfordshire Records Office for records on Bensley's work in the Hill End Asylum in St. Albans. https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/libraries-and-archives/hertfordshire-archives-and-local-studies/hertfordshire-archives-and-local-studies.aspx.
- The V&A for Edwardian dress and pram information. https://www.vam.ac.uk.

- The Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) for workplace records at the Charles Burrell Factory. https://merl.reading.ac.uk/.
- MERL were not able to help and directed me to the Road Locomotive Society. This too proved a dead end as no records existed and, even if they had, it seems that Bensley never worked there. https://roadlocosociety.org.uk/.

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