

Wilde Rewound: Time-Travelling with Oscar in Recent Author Fictions

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'You cannot publish this, Oscar. It is nonsense – and most of it is quite untrue.'
'What on earth do you mean?'
'It is invented.'
'It is my life.'

(Peter Ackroyd, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, 160-161)

Abstract: In the early 1980s historical figures in general – and writers from the past in particular – entered a kind of Golden Age thanks to fiction. Through various forms of semi-biographical novels and other narratives, they have, from that time forward, been enjoying a pampered life in a new genre called “the author-as-character” (Franssen and Hoenselaars 1999) or “author fictions” (Savu 2009) that reanimate them or conjure them up in a present that constantly seeks to reassert its link with the past. This is particularly true of Oscar Wilde’s life, for his disparate and colourful personality has been time and again re-appropriated in recent fiction. This article focuses on three of these contemporary fictional depictions: an epistolary novel, an epistolary website and a fictional interview, all three dealing with a fictionalised Oscar Wilde conversing with a contemporary author who is also an interviewer in his or her own way and right. Because they are very close to each other in terms of narration (i.e. impersonation and pastiche) and subject, putting words in Wilde’s mouth as though they were his own, *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde*, the website *Dialogus*, and *Coffee with Oscar Wilde*, represent three fascinating means of exploring how Oscar’s rebirth as a man and author actually takes place. Among the numerous fictional portraits of Oscar Wilde, I have thus chosen to pay particular attention to the depictions that are well anchored in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and which do not, therefore, display a narrative that would merely take place during the *fin de siècle*, with only period-style people in period costume. By contrast, the three portraits are literal time-travelling narratives that endeavour to bridge the gap between past, present and future.

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1. Introduction

“Fictionalizing the biographies of the literary greats,” as Laura E. Savu has put it (209), has proved a compelling enterprise for the last thirty years or so. Well-known or renowned during their lifetime, writer figures are made even more special today as they are revived and revised in fictional portraits focusing not only on their past or even—as I will illustrate in the course of this article—*present* whereabouts, but equally on their thoughts and relationships, more than on their literary output. This is especially the case for Oscar Wilde, whose passionate life has emerged as a particularly convincing

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springboard for the development of numerous and most varied fictionalised adaptations of his personal story, in novels such as *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (Peter Ackroyd, 1983)—a work that marked the start of this eclectic and fervent range of narratives about Wilde’s trials and tribulations—, *The God of Mirrors* (Robert Reilly, 1986), *Sherlock Holmes and the Mysterious Friend of Oscar Wilde* (Russell A. Brown, 1988), *The Coward Does It with a Kiss* (Rohase Piercy, 1990), *Wilde West* (Walter Satterthwait, 1991) or *The Case of the Pederast’s Wife* (Clare Elfman, 2000). Gyles Brandreth’s very recent and ongoing series entitled *The Oscar Wilde Murder Mysteries* (2007-present) testifies to the enduring interest in Oscar Wilde as it has been promoted and strengthened in contemporary (biographical) fiction.

This contribution will examine three distinct(ive) portraits: an epistolary novel, an epistolary website, and a fictional interview, all three dealing with a fictionalised Oscar Wilde conversing with a present-day author who is accordingly an interviewer in his or her own way and right. Very close to each other in terms of narration (i.e. impersonation and pastiche) and subject (Oscar Wilde’s private life), putting words in Wilde’s mouth as though they were his own, *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde* (C. Robert Holloway, 1997), the website *Dialogus* (<http://www.dialogus2.org>, 1999-present) and *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* (Merlin Holland, 2007), represent fascinating means of exploring how Oscar’s rebirth as a man and author actually takes place.

The contemporary renaissance of author figures actually occurs in three different ways: first, in contemporary narratives that take place in the nineteenth century during the *fin de siècle* with what I call period-style people in period costume (e.g. Ackroyd’s *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*); second, in narratives of the lost documents/previously unpublished memoirs or notebooks (such as Brandreth’s *The Oscar Wilde Murder Mysteries*); and finally in time-travelling narratives, which constitute the focus of this article.

2. ‘I’ Speak to Dead People: Time-Travelling Narratives

In our postmodern world turned “post-mortem,” to quote from the title of Laura E. Savu’s book, *Postmortem Postmodernists. The Afterlife of the Author in Recent Narrative* (2009),¹ speaking to or with dead people—or allowing dead people to converse together—bears witness to the ontological postmodernist crossing and dissolution of previously so-called impassable boundaries. As far as Oscar Wilde is concerned, the following titles published as recently as in the last ten years speak volumes about this phenomenon: *Sense and Sensuality: Jesus Talks to Oscar Wilde on the Pursuit of Pleasure* (Ravi Zacharias, 2002), *Oh! Père Lachaise: Oscar’s Wilde Purgatory* (Jim Yates, 2007), *Dialogues outre-ciel* (Marie-Laure Béraud, 2010). These books, along with the three other biofictions that will be looked into in this article, are centred on a similar core

¹ I contend that the term ‘post-mortem’ in relation to fictions in which historical authors are resurrected can be understood literally in the sense that the narratives dissect the lives of these characters in the light of new clues, remodelling their existence according to the contemporary’s writer agenda and, as Savu would put it, “of recent critical thought on self, creativity, history, language, and representation” (Savu 21).

idea: everything must concur to bridge the gap between past, present and future, or, to put it slightly differently, between the previous, the current and the next world.

This “desire to speak with the dead” (Greenblatt 1)² is both enticing and reminiscent of the Victorian *fin de siècle* vogue for Spiritualism and the “search for proof of life after death” (Foxwell 289). Interestingly, it seems that the recent interest in Neo-Victorianism³ not only consists in re-appropriating historical figures from the Victorian era and fictionalise them in recognisable shapes, but also in actualising one of the period’s hallmarks—spiritualism—in a truly postmodern fashion, subverting it as much as possible. Biofictions about Oscar Wilde achieve this goal in a very simple way: they give the floor to their own version of the man by making him assert himself in conversation or in writing, the two occupations at which he most excelled. Tales such as these give him the unique opportunity to exchange opinions and moods with fellow historical artists or with the common (wo)man, in a somehow parallel world, different from the one we live (and he lived) in because of the very palpable breaking of the limitations of time, space and medium.

As a result, among the numerous contemporary fictional portraits of Oscar Wilde, this article will pay particular attention to the depictions that are well-anchored in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and which do not, therefore, display a narrative that would solely take place at a time contemporaneous to historical Wilde’s, as is in fact the case in most of the biofictions about Oscar.⁴ On the contrary, the three selected works of fiction are above all a dialogue between past and present views. Fictionalised Oscar Wilde still evolves in his nineteenth-century environment while his interlocutor is bound to the present-day world. In other words, these narratives are a literary and human exchange between then and now and represent “our desire to look into the past for the present” (Waldrep 62).

This article will not elaborate on the contents of the three author fictions, but rather illustrate how Oscar Wilde’s life stories have been enthrallingly revisited. In these narratives, Oscar is reborn in a most particular way, for he is revived as a man and revised as an author. Because they give free rein to what I call a ‘factual imagination’⁵ by blending real events with fictional accounts of Wilde’s earthy and earthly existence,

² This is the uncanny opening line of his book *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988.

³ For a thought-provoking study of the Neo-Victorian phenomenon, see Heilmann and Llewellyn (2010).

⁴ To avoid confusion, I will henceforth refer to the historical Oscar Wilde as ‘Wilde’ and to his fictional versions as ‘Oscar.’

⁵ What I mean by ‘factual imagination’ is that the invention process is always based on *real* events in fictional portrayals of historical figures in general and author figures in particular. The biographical novelists (or ‘portraitists’ when the depiction is not a novel) do not flee the facts as they have been recorded by history but use them in an imaginative way. This somehow partakes of the belief that history is itself a fiction, as theorists such as Naomi Jacobs have highlighted: “[There is a] common loss of faith that fiction and reality are separate realms. This sense that history and identity are verbal constructs, necessarily removed from the ‘real thing,’ has freed many writers to do new things within familiar modes. Realistic novelists use real people realistically, satirists use them satirically, postmodernists use them deconstructively” (Jacobs 204). Note also the terms that have regularly been used to stress and describe the intermingling of fact and fancy in recent fiction: “biographical novel” (Lodge 8), “vie romancée” (Franssen and Hoenselaars 15), “fictional biography” (Schabert 5, Cohn 85), “fiction biography” (Jacobs xix) and “fiction history” (Jacobs xx), “fictionalized historical biography” (Cohn 85), and the like.

those literal afterlives interestingly revisit his personality and lifestyle by paying him a visit; he is, in a way, being interviewed at his premises, on his own ground and territory, both literally and figuratively speaking. In other words, these portraits set out to reveal an altogether satisfying exchange between the here and then—or between this world and the next—in which the improbable becomes possible and time-travelling is the norm. Whereas fictionalised Oscar answers the contemporary novelist C. Robert Holloway's letters and postcards from the hereafter, he also sends two acceptance letters to the editor of the website *Dialogus* in order to become part and parcel of this whole new enterprise which consists in allowing figures from the past to speak, ultimately, for themselves. He subsequently responds to fan mail via the website. As for *Coffee with Oscar Wilde*, a contemporary but fictional interviewer meets Wilde in his Parisian haunt in 1898 and thoroughly probes him on the whys and wherefores of his peculiar lifestyle.

This article will show how these three semi-biographical narratives make Oscar emerge from the ashes not only by re-appropriating his aphorisms and rejuvenating them, but also by developing their own perspectives and agendas in order to offer their personal version of the historical Oscar Wilde's life/lives. Travelling back and forth, 'Second Life'-like, from a virtual to a 'real' world, they play with fact and fiction in a way that makes readers wonder at what might or could have genuinely happened or, for that matter, is yet to ensue.

3. *Dialogus*: Oscar's Lives on a Computer Screen

Dialogus is an intriguing website that sets to immortalise renowned figures from the past by renewing and recapturing their popular aura. Some impersonators thus reinvent themselves as Molière, Walt Disney, Gandhi, Julius Caesar, and so forth. The concept reads as follows:

They are alive[.] An event revolutionizes our minds. Its outcome: People who have marked history accept to come out of their isolation and are willing to participate in a huge conversation with whoever wants to write to them – as long as their questions are constructive and respectful. [...] Write to Our Personalities! They Will Answer You! (www.dialogus2.org/enindex.html)

As it is, this website revolves around the posting of questions to various historical or fictive—but all popular—characters, questions that originate from inquiring Internet users. Against all odds, the individuals so conjured up and addressed to may very well answer, as the multitudinous entries on the website indicate.

In order to become a member of the *Dialogus* community, well-known personalities from the past (scientists, painters, writers, characters of fiction, composers, politicians, etc) must first send an acceptance letter to the editor of the website. In the case of Oscar Wilde he actually sent two such requests. The reason is uncomplicated: when an impersonator is no longer close-at-hand, personalities become

dormant—that is, “temporarily unavailable.” At the time of writing, this is Oscar’s current state and status (<http://dialogus2.org/wilde.html>). Fans who want to write to him must therefore check the website regularly to see whether he has been reawakened or not. Although he has already made a comeback at one point—after an illness that had impeded him from writing anything⁶—he is presently dormant again. There is, consequently, a keen sense of expectation. Will he be revived once more? Will he put pen to paper again?⁷ How long is he going to stay away? And, when he is back, is he going to answer my question? This renders the whole enterprise somehow elliptical, stressing the fact that nobody’s life is ever complete, and can never be perceived from all its angles simultaneously.

Technically speaking, we cannot thus speak of one single virtual life but rather of a whole array of virtual *lives*, for one single historical figure may be revived by different impersonators, who legitimately choose which avatar they want to promote. A variety of facets are thus put to the fore, according to the writer’s conviction and agenda. Different lenses and/or glasses are there to be worn. They are, however, not always or exclusively rose-coloured, but all kinds of fascinating nuances emanate from them.

In the letters that have been answered by an impersonated Oscar,⁸ everything seems to oscillate between the real and the virtual world, as this reply leads the reader to comprehend:

Pour en revenir à votre témoignage, je vous avoue ne pas bien comprendre... Vous avez assisté à une sorte de ballet étrange où les officiants se peignaient les lèvres en rouge pour embrasser une pierre tombale portant mon nom? Mais c’est impossible, car voyez-vous, à l’heure où je vous écris, je suis encore vivant. Certes, la méningite dont j’ai été affligé ces derniers mois m’a retiré bien des forces, mais vous pouvez me croire, je suis encore là pour vous répondre...⁹

⁶ As fictional Oscar himself states: “une complexion fort importante m’avait éloigné pendant quelque temps de toute activité littéraire” (<http://dialogus2.org/WIL/WIL-acceptation2.html>, accessed February 10, 2012).

⁷ He does *write* while a go-between puts his words on the screen, as is made clear in the letter “La langue de Molière” (<http://dialogus2.org/WIL/lalanguedemoliere.html>).

⁸ The available letters to Oscar and his answers to them can be read on the website by clicking on the headings (similar to the ‘Object’ section of an e-mail), which read as follows: ‘Une Guinness?’, ‘Sans doute à bientôt’, ‘Votre bravoure’, ‘Le rouge à lèvres’, ‘Citation’, ‘Question de sexualité’, ‘Dorian Gray’, ‘Le miroir et la mort’, ‘Pour un magicien de la littérature’, ‘Des questions’, ‘Comparaison à la manière de Boris VIAN?’, ‘Le portrait de Dorian Gray’, ‘Vos jeunes amants’, ‘Histoire d’O’, ‘Dandysme et XXIe siècle’, ‘La langue de Molière’, ‘Pédérastie’, ‘Les réflexions de Henry Wotton’, ‘Je te connais peu’, ‘Que regrettez-vous?’, ‘Lettre à un génie de la littérature’, ‘L’adultère’, ‘Conseils de lecture’, ‘Le portrait...’

(<http://www.dialogus2.org/wilde.html>, accessed February 10, 2012). Unfortunately, there is no mention whatsoever of any date, so that the reader does not know when the letters were sent (the website was inaugurated in 1999) or when Oscar replied to them, let alone how long he has been “temporarily unavailable.”

⁹ “To come back to your story, I must admit I do not understand you very well... You witnessed a kind of strange ballet in which the participants painted their lips red in order to kiss a gravestone that bore my name? But this is impossible, because, you see, I am still alive as I write this letter. The meningitis that has afflicted me these last months may have taken away much of my strength, but you can believe me, I am

Laura E. Savu appositely mentions that in author fictions, “neither the historical nor the virtual life can be understood in the absence of the other” (Savu 240). This is exactly what happens in *Dialogus*, for without the virtual Oscar, we cannot get in touch with the historical one and vice versa. The editor of the website, as has been pointed out, maintains that the characters are still alive. As a result, we (and, by extension, the portrayed figures) are not apprised as to when they are going to pass away in their real life, so that the survival process can lead to misunderstandings between the contemporary fan and the fictional version of Oscar, as is exemplified in the quoted extract. By asking constructive questions about his private and/or professional lives, people with an interest in the historical Wilde make it possible for others to get an imaginative and original glimpse at what this colourful character might have been like. The rebirth of the author is thus two-fold: readers become authors and through this very process, Oscar becomes an author again himself. This is equally the case in *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde*.

4. *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde: An Updated ‘Life in Letters’*

In Holloway’s 1997 novel, Oscar’s life is put into perspective through the pen of a present-day gay production designer turned writer of letters. The term ‘rebirth’ may imply that somebody died but now lives again in another medium or through another person, as the website *Dialogus* has shown. This could also mean the discovery and publication of some previously unheard-of manuscript, which is the case in *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde*. As such, the interplay between past, present and future speculations is explicitly foregrounded in Holloway’s story, the novel being an exchange of letters between a fictionalised, late-twentieth-century novelist (Holloway) and Oscar, who casually answers from the hereafter. Anxious to set the record straight, Holloway’s Oscar wishes, at the end of the book, to publish a revised version of his famous *De Profundis*, therefore securing his literary future and renown in the twenty-first century and beyond. Consequently, in this novel, the rebirth *as* an author—and not merely as a historical character—is pushed even farther.

This resurrection occurs progressively. The initial missive of this imagined correspondence, quoted in full at the end of the book (Holloway 308-311), is primarily a letter from a fan to a man, in which Holloway expresses the desire of many of his gay contemporaries when he mentions the reason why he feels “possessed by an overwhelming desire to communicate to you” (Holloway 308), that is, to “hear your version of that terrible time in our history” (Holloway 311). Although he is well aware that Oscar “can’t possibly write back” (Holloway 309), Holloway’s impulse to put pen to paper originates from a dream vision he experiences while staying in Oscar Wilde’s room at the Cadogan Hotel, where the latter was arrested a century earlier. Against all odds, Oscar answers. The two men thereafter proceed to a regular exchange of letters

still there to answer you...” (<http://www.dialogus2.org/WIL/histoiredo.html>, accessed December 8, 2011). My translation.

and postcards, Oscar writing back from the “other side of town” (Holloway 70), as he calls his whereabouts, moving “instantly and at will around all his old stomping grounds” (Holloway 70), and being acquainted, also, with what happens in the present world—unlike *Dialogus*’ Oscar.

Towards the end of the novel, after a sustained two-year correspondence, Holloway’s Oscar announces it is time for him to instigate his “long awaited reincarnation” (Holloway 306), which has been prompted by Holloway’s proposal to publish their letters in book form.¹⁰ Oscar agrees, on the condition that the publication includes his revision of *De Profundis* (Holloway 315-324), whose “thrust has been on my conscience for decades” (Holloway: 294) and which he “continue[s] to polish daily” (Holloway 294). “At last I feel it is ready to be read,” he proclaims. (Holloway 294).

Holloway’s exhilarated initiative to write to Oscar has accordingly allowed the latter to ultimately promulgate his knowledge to the world—and to self-advertise in the process:

I have momentous news: For ninety-five years I have declined myriad invitations to leave this side of town and rejoin the mortal coil. [...] Until now. It seems the World, more than ever before, needs art and beauty to mend the broken hearts of its overworked, bedraggled millions. It needs Pontiffs dedicated to pontificating the importance of flamboyance and outrageousness. (Holloway 306)

As such, the rebirth of and as an author as displayed in “novel lives,” to use a term by Cora Kaplan (62), is peculiarly linked to the past, for both Oscar and Holloway endeavour to get a grip on their past lives by comparing yesterday and today, all the while being aware that these were no ‘good old days.’ Oscar’s willingness to publish his updated version of *De Profundis* analogously testifies to his longing to be present in the future. His rebirth as an author therefore exemplifies his renaissance as a character of fiction as depicted in *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde*. The link with the future is furthermore crucial because subsequent letters addressed to Oscar will answer inquiries adumbrated in previous missives and ask additional questions as well. If Oscar

¹⁰ Like most writers of note, the historical Wilde has an edition of letters. See for instance *Oscar Wilde. A Life in Letters* (2003 and 2007), edited by Merlin Holland, Wilde’s only grandson. Consequently, some room must here been allocated for speculation as to the meaning of the term ‘unauthorized.’ The term can be interpreted by asking oneself, in a metafictional manner, the following questions: Who wrote them? Were they even written? Is there reason to believe plagiarism is at hand? Or libel? Did Oscar accept the publication, did he give his assent? In any case, the term has to do with the letters being dissimilar from the official version, albeit in an edited form, as is also the case with the rendition of *De Profundis* elaborated on in the novel. Interestingly, it is Holloway’s Oscar who suggests the title for the book: “while calculatedly punning, [it] fudges with the truth just enough to get you off plagerism’s [sic] hook. ‘THE UNAUTHORIZED LETTERS OF OSCAR WILDE’. I hope you see the sense of it” (Holloway 295). Similarly, readers could ask themselves whether Oscar is really reborn, has really come back or whether everything is a mere figment of C. Robert Holloway’s imagination, just like the dream vision he had at the beginning of the novel.

decides not to react or stops answering, then the whole renewal process will become precarious.

But of all the questions asked, ‘Why did you (not) do that?’ is probably the one that encompasses all potential other inquiries and symbolises the novel as a whole. Holloway identifies as a gay writer, so he wishes to feel connected with a typical gay icon by entering the meanderings of his soul. The novel is in that respect very similar to Neil Bartlett’s *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (1988), which is both a plea and an indictment, alternatively applauding and blaming historical Wilde for not having dared speak up and put himself together after his downfall, all the while being very much admiring of Wilde’s character. Oscar’s paradoxical life is therefore exploited to the full in Holloway’s novel. Not only are there future expectations about the past, but questions germane to the notion of fact and fiction in life-writing abound. ‘Can we trust the past and its narrators?’ is one of them. In such time-travelling narratives, there is, in other words, invariably a link between the present of the situation and the days gone by, as *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* indicates.

5. *Coffee with Oscar Wilde*: An ‘Inter-Centuries’ Interview

The act of self-publicising hinted at in Holloway’s novel is also very much present in Merlin Holland’s *Coffee with Oscar Wilde*. In a similar vein to *Dialogus*, the publishers of the *Coffee with...* series outline their concept as follows:

Just imagine how thrilling it would be to chat with the wisest scholars, the greatest philosophers, the holiest spiritual leaders, the most brilliant writers and artists, and the brightest stars of stage and screen. That’s exactly what the exciting and wonderfully original *Coffee with...* series enables us to do. It’s a completely different kind of biography that brings the subject to life as never before through imaginary conversations, giving us the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to sit down and exchange words with the likes of Plato, Hemingway, and Marilyn Monroe. Sit down, pour yourself a cup, and get to know one of the greats.¹¹

Holland’s 2007 book thus plays with the contingencies of the interview format, relying both on well-established facts and on the interviewee’s personality. Replete with off-the-cuff remarks, the fictive interview allows for a compelling re-acquaintance with the subject at hand. Oscar, the conversationalist *par excellence* is brought back to life—or rather thoroughly interviewed by a present-day fictive interviewer “over several cups of coffee one rainy afternoon in Paris” (Holland: 10)—before his demise a couple of years

¹¹Available from <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/u/Imaginary-Conversations-Interviews-with-Authors-and-Artists/379001158>, accessed December 8, 2011. Up to now, it is possible to have coffee with Aristotle, the Buddha, Dickens, Einstein, Groucho Marx, Hemingway, Marilyn Monroe, Michelangelo, Mozart, Plato, Isaac Newton, Shakespeare, Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde. See, for instance, the editor’s website or <http://amazon.com> for further detail.

later in November 1900. As Holland specifies before the interview commences: “[o]ver the following pages, Oscar Wilde engages in an imaginary conversation covering fourteen themes, responding freely to searching questions” (Holland 29).¹² Like *The Unauthorized Letters*, *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* essentially is a congenial meeting with Oscar. It does not harbour an altogether different conception than *Dialogus* and *The Unauthorized Letters* and indeed retains similar characteristics, especially in the questions-answers game. Internet users, Holloway, and the reporter steer the conversation according to their own inclinations.

Coffee with Oscar Wilde nevertheless looks like the most factual account of the three. Although, as Holland highlights, “the interviews in this book are purely fictional,” they do have “a solid basis in biographical fact” (Holland back cover). As the author makes clear, the text of the interview “draws so heavily on the works and letters of Oscar Wilde, whether quoting directly or by adapting his words, that to have given the sources for every phrase would have required many pages of endnotes” (Holland 138).

This biofiction actually brings to the fore the same kind of afterlife imparted to Holloway’s Oscar, i.e. posthumous fame. *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* refers to posterity, coordinated here by the interviewer when he observes: “Well, I’m glad I shall be able to report to posterity that you haven’t lost your taste for the exotic” (Holland 133), to which Holland’s Oscar retorts:

Ah, now, talking of posterity, perhaps you can tell me where I stand in the estimation of the literary critics? Not that I particularly care to hear their views, but I should like to know whether they persist in confusing the artist with his subject matter and still accuse an author of immorality because it happens to be the theme of one of his books. (Holland 134)

Along with *Dialogus* and *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde*, *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* represents metafiction at its best. We can only know Oscar in person through texts and conversation; as Linda Hutcheon appositely observes in reference to historiographic metafiction, “it offers a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces—be they literary or historical” (Hutcheon 125). The three biofictions are first and foremost a dialogue between past and present views about Wilde, but they also hint at his future (posterity). They are a literal and literary exchange between the here and then (where ‘then’ can refer either to the past or to the future, viz. ‘before’ versus ‘later on’). The ‘Oscar Wilde’ who emerges from the ashes is accordingly a mix between fact and fiction. *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde* in particular alludes to the fact that his past challenges his present because the predominant vision we still have of him nowadays is associated with his being a homosexual.¹³ But this is

¹² The fourteen themes are: ‘Introducing Mr Wilde,’ ‘Student of Greek,’ ‘Professor of Aesthetics,’ ‘Discovering America,’ ‘Almost Respectable,’ ‘Shocking the Middle Classes,’ ‘Feasting with Panthers,’ ‘A Fatal Friendship,’ ‘The Libel Trial,’ ‘Decadence Discredited,’ ‘The Artist in Prison,’ ‘A Sort of Freedom,’ ‘The Last Act’ and ‘After Oscar.’

¹³ This is the core idea of Holloway’s novel, and appears less pregnant in the two other semi-biographical narratives, probably because Wilde was much more than that, both privately and professionally. *Dialogus*

not the only view that is promoted. How could this be, with a historical figure so popular that numerous writers over the past thirty years have contemplated his miscellaneous reincarnations?

6. Conclusion

‘Oscar Wilde’ is a postmodern character, fashioned out of different interpretations and representations. He can be regarded as part and parcel of a ‘return of the living dead’ phenomenon, which is made possible not only because authors never really died entirely (they live on in their works and biographies) but equally because they now appear in fiction as characters under their own, historical names, describing themselves warts and all.

The variety and scope of contemporary fictional depictions of a past life that has been time and again convincingly re-appropriated and reinterpreted challenge the notion that there is but one recorded History as opposed to multitudinous fanciful histories. Like a phoenix, Oscar Wilde is brought back to life, posthumously and metafictionally. As such, these portraits are neither mere fictional accounts of his life nor unmitigated well-developed plots. Rather, they unfold essential features of what is termed ‘life (re-)writing.’ Along with Oscar’s *literal* fictional rebirth (i.e. his being revived in contemporary biofictions), these works also epitomise Wilde’s *literary* fictional comeback, for he is given the unique opportunity to practice his arts—writing and conversation—again. All this is enabled by time-travelling narratives that bridge the gap between epochs, places and media.

When all is said and done, one may also suggest another rebirth of Oscar the man and the author, a rebirth that involves the ‘common’ readers, who are no specialists in the historical Oscar Wilde’s biography and/or works. These readers, having enjoyed Oscar’s story thus recounted, may very appositely feel the need to know more about—and consequently to investigate—the particulars of a lifetime they have just finished reading. Contemporary authors are not, therefore, the only ones who put new life into a historical figure called ‘Oscar Wilde.’ The readers equally contribute to this renewal of interest in the author. Even if their reading sessions have not thoroughly gratified and satisfied them, they have at least gained knowledge of one out of several images pertaining to Wilde’s truest personality.

The implications for the postmodern understanding of authorship are linked to the ‘unauthorized’ aspect of the depictions, where the adjective should be understood literally; although Oscar is represented as an author, he is deconstructed as a character evolving in a fictional world that is not, ultimately, of his own making. Everything he writes or talks about in the three semi-biographical narratives that this article has examined has either been more or less faithfully reconstructed or altogether reinvented. Oscar Wilde is still topical today but the portraits show he is remembered more for his private escapades than for his oeuvre, thereby implying that his posthumous fame relies

and Holland are more inclined to show other facets as well, especially because the format they rely on makes this a mite more manageable.

above all on the interest contemporary readers have in the lives of (in)famous individuals more than their real professional careers. Revealing one's authorship through writing and interviews appears to be an efficient means to ensure one's posterity, although what is disclosed in the course of these two activities should, it would seem, always have a bearing on some public display of privacy. The biofictions do not only highlight that the historical Oscar Wilde's multi-faceted life can indefinitely be reconstructed. They also indicate that an author like Wilde can be recreated because his works still appeal to the general reader and chime, when all is said and done, with the playwright's own assertion that he put his genius into his life and only his talent into his works.¹⁴ As a result, as long as the flame of curiosity is rekindled and reawakened, revisited Oscar lives again—and on—through contemporary biographical fictions.

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¹⁴ "Do you wish to know the great drama of my life? I have given my genius to my life, to my work only my talent" (Oscar Wilde quoted in Blei, Gide and La Jeunesse 49).

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