

Biographical Fiction's Challenge to Realism:

Patricia Duncker's *Sophie and the Sibyl* and Alicia Giménez Bartlett's *Una habitación ajena*

Lucia Boldrini

Abstract

Starting from a brief discussion of biographical fiction and the challenges it poses to realism, this case study compares Patricia Duncker's *Sophie and the Sibyl* (2015), centered on George Eliot alongside various real and fictional characters (some of whom drawn from Eliot's own fiction), and Alicia Giménez Bartlett's *Una habitación ajena* (1997), focused on the (fictional) diary of Virginia Woolf's cook Nellie Boxall and on the relationships between the writer and her domestic servants. This study considers the texts' complex narrative structures, the reliability or otherwise of their narrators and the hypocrisy or otherwise of the historical protagonists, and, crucially, the critique of their authors' discussions of realism in their respective 'manifestos' (in particular Chapter 17 of Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Woolf's "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown"). In their investigation of the gaps between theory and practice, between present and past, between authorial, narrative and historical subjectivity, and between conceptions of how reality can and should be represented, the novels seek not so much to give us historically believable contexts and individuals, as, rather, to explore the distances and continuities between the intellectual, literary and ethical premises that shape our constantly transforming understanding of these concepts.