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## The Space Between: Art and the Artist in Mary Linskill's *The Haven Under the Hill* (1886)

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### **Boundaries: What Lies Between the Art and the Artist?**

As I read her works I found that Mary Linskill revealed much of herself in her own writing. She never wrote her autobiography and only a very small part of her diary has survived, just over one year, in fact. I have felt it right to let her own words tell this story, but for the sake of fluency I have not used quotation marks. It must be understood that nine-tenths of this book is in Mary Linskill's own words. The excerpts are drawn from all her books and several shorter stories, - sometimes several paragraphs, and sometimes a few words.<sup>1</sup>

Thus begins Cordelia Stamp's 'imaginative biography' of Victorian, Whitby-based novelist and short story writer, Mary Linskill, ('the Whitby Novelist' as she was termed during her own life time).<sup>2</sup> Related, as Stamp asserts, in Linskill's own words, Stamp has, in her rendering of Linskill's life, stitched together extracts from a variety of Linskill's published works, and asserts within the slim biography that these fictional works are representations of Linskill's own life.

This, it initially seemed to me, is a problematic way of presenting supposedly factual information concerning an author's life. Utilising events, actions, and sometimes entire conversations between characters lifted from a variety of Linskill's

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<sup>1</sup> Cordelia Stamp, *Mary Linskill 1840-1891* (Whitby: Caedmon Publishers, 1980), p. i.

<sup>2</sup> From the blurb of Stamp, *Mary Linskill 1840-1891*.

texts, Stamp reconstructs these as being based entirely on fact. She does this even though Linskill's works were openly sold as fictions. Yet it is undeniable that Linskill's novels and short stories blur the boundaries between what is fiction and what is reality, and as this paper progresses, it will become clear that it is remarkably tempting to read *The Haven Under the Hill* – Linskill's most celebrated novel – as being somehow representative of the author's own life experiences and views. Detailing established events from history, including known events from her own life, this 'fictional' work constantly bridges the gap between the real and unreal.

*The Haven Under the Hill* is a novel which does little to disguise the fact that it is based in the real North Yorkshire town of Whitby and, due to the reality of its location, in addition to the factual nature of these established events from history and its inclusion of known events from Linskill's own biography, it becomes a novel which sits squarely across a boundary of 'art' and 'reality'. As Linskill's most famous novel, and one into which, according to her biographer Stamp, she put her 'whole soul', *The Haven Under the Hill* is an excellent example from Linskill's canon of work in order to seek to understand what lies in the space between the art and the artist.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Little We Know of Mary Linskill (1840-1891)**

Part of the problem Stamp must have faced in the reconstruction of Mary Linskill's life is that not very much is authoritatively known about her. Beyond her numerous short stories and novels which were initially serialised in such publications as *Good Words*, a fragment of her personal diary survives, held by the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society Library. Despite enjoying a measure of popularity during her own lifetime, Linskill's works, and her own limited fame, had begun to

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<sup>3</sup> Stamp, *Mary Linskill*, p. 107.

fade even before she died. When she did eventually die in 1891, her family were so impoverished they could not afford a gravestone to commemorate her. Her nameless grave had to wait eight years until public subscription raised the money required to place a stone there. The many periodicals she wrote for had largely forgotten her by the time of her death. The Athenaeum casually recorded her demise thus: ‘We forgot to mention last week the decease of Miss Mary Linskill, a novelist whose tales, though somewhat sombre in tone, achieved considerable popularity.’<sup>4</sup>

Those who did remember her told a somewhat different story than Stamp does in her biography:

Of her association with Good Words, cordial and mutually appreciative as it was, it scarcely becomes us to speak in these columns. At the same time, it would be, perhaps, a scarcely honest memoir if we did not recognise the fact that editors had their grievances also in their transactions with her; for latterly in particular as her strength declined, her will also grew weak and apparently incapable of urging her to the point of applying to the tasks she had undertaken; so that though promise after promise was made, each succeeding attempt to realise them appeared to become more and more hopelessly ineffectual. Finally, letters were not able to command an answer, and then the end was not far off.<sup>5</sup>

Donald MacLeod, in his obituary, then details a catalogue of illnesses which afflicted Linskill’s latter years, and her subsequent ‘very natural resort to narcotics’ which ‘became by degrees an overwhelming temptation.’<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, Stamp apparently found no evidence of Linskill’s drug addiction and failure to meet her

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<sup>4</sup> Anon., ‘Literary Gossip’, *The Athenaeum*, No. 3313, (25 April 1891), 537-538 (p. 538).

<sup>5</sup> Donald MacLeod, ‘Miss Linskill’, *Good Words*, 32, (January 1891), 477-482 (pp. 478-9).

<sup>6</sup> MacLeod, *Good Words*, p. 479.

obligations within her fictions, and therefore this aspect of Linskill's life remains conspicuously absent from the biography.

So little is known about Linskill that those who did write about her could not even agree as to the situation of her grave. J. S. Fletcher, in his book entitled *Picturesque Yorkshire. In Eighteen Parts. No. XVII. The Coast – Redcar to Scarbro'*. Founded on Personal Observation (1901), recorded Linskill as being 'interred on the south side of the old church, [with] a suitable monument commemorating her literary achievements.'<sup>7</sup> However, as R. F. Mcc observed in his review of this book, this was not the case. Linskill was actually buried about a mile away from the main churchyard at St. Mary's in Whitby (adjacent to the famous Abbey at the top of the 199 steps) in the more modern cemetery at Larpool. Whitby's entry in *The Oxford Guide to Literary Britain & Ireland* plays it safe by merely observing that she was buried in 'the cemetery', without detailing which Whitby cemetery they mean.<sup>8</sup>

All of this is unsurprising when one considers Linskill's case. She was a minor Victorian novelist, one of no doubt hundreds of minor Victorian novelists, who picked up her pen in order to survive. As John Sutherland observes of these types of writers: 'the most exhaustive investigations can turn up no worthwhile biographical (or sometimes even reliable biographical) data' upon writers of this ilk.<sup>9</sup> Sutherland continues:

Another source of obscurity is the sheer human insignificance of the very minor Victorian novelist. In personal terms, they were of no more consequence than the cabby who drove Dickens to the All

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<sup>7</sup> Noted in R. F. Mcc, 'The Charm of Cleveland', *The Speaker: The Liberal Review*, (13 April 1901), 50-51 (p. 51).

<sup>8</sup> *The Oxford Guide to Literary Britain & Ireland*, ed. by Daniel Hahn and Nicholas Robins, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> John Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2006), p. 152.

the Year Round office, or the chambermaid who cleaned the room at the 'Priory', where George Eliot wrote *Felix Holt, the Radical*.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Haven Under the Hill (1886)***

Linskill's most celebrated work, as noted earlier, was based in her home town of Whitby and titled *The Haven Under the Hill*. Originally serialised throughout 1886 in *Good Words*, the novel was then published in its entirety in September 1886. The novel is a Bildungsroman, relating the story of Dorigen Gower, a young, working-class girl. Dorigen is the daughter of a jet worker (a huge industry in Whitby during Victoria's reign, particularly after the death of Prince Albert, as jet was traditionally worn as mourning jewellery). In delicate health because her mother had kept her confined closely within the house as a child, Dorigen's childhood is spent in the company of her books, her godfather (a retired whaler named 'Uncle Than') and her aunt.

As a child, Dorigen is influenced by Whitby's literary heritage, recalling particularly the poet Caedmon, one of the earliest English poets, who was reputed to have lived in the town's Abbey. Indeed, Dorigen feels a calling towards literature as her vocation, as if God himself is instructing her that this is the correct path for her to follow, much as Caedmon felt spiritually inspired to compose poetry:

Caedmon had walked on the windy cliff-top, and in the Abbey plain just above, and the voice that spoke to him in the night had spoken not many yards away from where she sat. The child's hands trembled as she turned the pages; for years afterward she

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<sup>10</sup> John Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2006), p. 152.

remembered how they trembled. The sense of the nearness of the things of which she read was a strong emotion.<sup>11</sup>

Convinced that she is following the correct course, Dorigen determines to become a writer. However, as any author will tell you, writing is not an easy vocation to make money from and Dorigen spends much of her adult life in the direst poverty because she cannot make a financial success of her ventures, even though, like Linskill herself, Dorigen does enjoy some popularity as an author. Dorigen's life changes for the better when she becomes acquainted with Michael, the wealthy hero of the tale, who falls in love with Dorigen. Michael attempts to aid Dorigen with both friendship and financial assistance, but Dorigen feels unable to marry him. Eventually, Michael meets somebody else and marries her. Known, as MacLeod observes of Linskill's writing, for a 'painful and even oppressive melancholy tone to her writings', readers cannot rely upon Linskill for a happy ending.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, no one is very happy at the close of the novel. Michael is unhappy with the wife he has chosen and wishes he had waited until Dorigen had felt able to marry him. Michael's wife is so unhappy that she leaves him and is killed in a cliff collapse (something else which the Whitby area is famous for). Dorigen is unhappy that she has released Michael from their friendship and ultimately dies an impoverished and lonely death.

### **Space Between: The Connection Between Art and the Artist in *The Haven Under the Hill***

It may seem from my synopsis as if this is a novel in which nothing much happens, and in some ways this is true. However, the novel is rich in characterisation and detail of the local area which Linskill brings to life and renders vividly before the

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill: A Novel* (Whitby: Horne and Son Limited, 1928), p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> MacLeod, *Good Words*, p. 478.

reader. As previously observed, Stamp asserts that Linskill's 'whole soul went into [the] book' and states: '[h]ad she written this book alone Mary Linskill's name would be worthy of a place in English Literature.'<sup>13</sup> She also asserts that the book is 'autobiographical' and some elements of the text appear to support this supposition.<sup>14</sup> It is documented that Linskill's father was a jet worker, and like Dorigen's jet worker father, he was 'not successful'<sup>15</sup>. Like Dorigen, Linskill was also noted for her 'delicacy both of physical constitution and spiritual insight'.<sup>16</sup> Again, like Dorigen, Linskill felt passionately that she was destined to be a writer, even in the face of repeated rejections from editors. In her diary entry for October 10<sup>th</sup> 1877, she writes: 'I believe that I shall yet follow my star, though it shines so darkly just now'.<sup>17</sup> In the richly descriptive scenes of the horrors of poverty in the Victorian age within Linskill's novel, the reader hears the echo of the author's own personal experience:

All her trinkets and ornaments had been sold, though most of them had been birthday or Christmas presents from Dr. Wilderslowe and Lady Anna; and even the cashmere shawl, which Colonel Wilderslowe had sent to her for her kindness to his little boy, was no longer in its place in her drawer. These were small thorns in her path, but they were painful.<sup>18</sup>

Comparing notes with another author, Dorigen learns the truth of the likelihood of her making a financial success of her writing:

In the first eleven years, my earnings averaged exactly two pounds seven shillings and fourpence per annum. I do not mind telling you

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<sup>13</sup> Stamp, Mary Linskill, p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Stamp, Mary Linskill, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> MacLeod, *Good Words*, p. 478.

<sup>16</sup> MacLeod, *Good Words*, p. 477.

<sup>17</sup> Detailed in Stamp, Mary Linskill, p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 365.



that there is no depth of want, no bitterness and humiliation of poverty that I have not known.<sup>19</sup>

It was a situation which Linskill knew all too well. On December 12<sup>th</sup> 1877, the day before her thirty-eighth birthday, she recorded in her diary:

So ended the last day of my bitter, disastrous thirty-seventh year; without exception the darkest of my whole life. Every hope and prayer has been denied, my plans have failed. My work lies unaccepted. I am now owing about £300 and we – my mother and I – have sevenpence between us.<sup>20</sup>

By this stage in her writing career, Linskill had been a published author for around six years and had eight publications to her name.

The space between Linskill's art and her life as an artist is narrowed yet further by Linskill weaving real historical events into her narrative. One example is that Linskill has Dorigen attend the Leeds Music Festival of 1883. This was a real event which her diary records her as visiting with her friends, the Lupton family of Leeds.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, within her obituary, MacLeod notes the inclusion of 'the vivid and eloquent description' of this event; 'which is, we have reason to know, an account of her own great personal enjoyment.'<sup>22</sup>

During Dorigen's childhood, she visits with the Salvain family and this is where she first becomes acquainted with Michael. On the journey to their home, Mrs Salvain cautions Dorigen about the safety of the cliffs in the surrounding area:

The cliff looks frightfully dangerous when you look up from below; indeed it is dangerous. You must never sit down under it,

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 335.

<sup>20</sup> Detailed in Stamp, *Mary Linskill*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>21</sup> Detailed in David Humble & Arthur F. Quinlan, *Mary Linskill: The Whitby Novelist* (Whitby: Horne & Son Limited, 1969), p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> MacLeod, *Good Words*, pp. 477-478.

my dear. Once – it was in the year 1808 – two young Staithes girls, sisters they were, sat down on the scaur – I’ll show you the exact spot when we go down – and while they were sitting there talking quietly together and looking out over the sea, a sharp splinter of rock fell from the top of the cliff, spinning round and round as it fell, and it struck one of the sisters on the back of the neck, so that it took her head quite off. The other sister saw it rolling away over the scaur to a great distance before it stopped. Think of that, my dear, whenever you are tempted to sit down under the cliffs. It is quite true, and what has happened once may always happen again.’<sup>23</sup>

This rather macabre story was based on actual occurrences, as recorded in the *Saturday Magazine* for 27 July 1833:

A singularly melancholy occurrence of this kind happened, nearly twenty-five years ago, about ten miles north of Whitby. Whilst two girls, sisters, were sitting on the beach, a stone, which, by striking against a ledge, had acquired a rotary motion, fell from the cliff, and hitting one of the girls on the hinder part of the neck, severed her head from her body, in a moment. The head was thrown to a considerable distance along the shore.<sup>24</sup>

Linskill similarly provides detail of the infamous storm of 9<sup>th</sup> February 1861, which led to the capsizing of a lifeboat, where all but one of the crew were lost, and ‘has yet a painful pre-eminence in the memory of living people of Hild’s Haven.’<sup>25</sup> She also places Dorigen’s Godfather, Than, as being present when the whaling ship the *Esk*, sank in 1826. Than relates the story:

It were along o’ that ‘at we were catched sa close in when t’gale sprang up all of a sudden fra t’north-east – that were o’ Wednesday, t’seventh o’ September; an’ we’d reckoned o’ reachin’

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<sup>23</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Anon., ‘The Abbey, Port and Lighthouse of Whitby, Yorkshire’, *Saturday Magazine*, 68, (27 July 1833), 68-9 (pp. 68-9).

<sup>25</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 179.

Hild's Haven for certain that same night. I'll never forget oor mate's words. [...] 'Hell or Hild's Haven afore midnight, my lads!' An' he never reached Hild's Haven.<sup>26</sup>

Than names his sunken ship 'The Narwhal'. However, the story is familiar in Whitby history as the captain of the stricken Esk, which sank just off the coast at Redcar near Whitby in 1826, also famously vowed to reach 'Hell or Whitby tonight'.<sup>27</sup> Further, if this story sounds slightly familiar even if not au fait with Whitby and its heritage, this will be because another famous Victorian author used something which is evocative of this legend in his own more celebrated novel. Bram Stoker, in *Dracula*, recreates his own newspaper report of the event, framed in 'the cutting from the *Dailygraph*'<sup>28</sup> which is pasted into Mina Murray's diary. In this, the reporter alleges that 'one old salt' watching the wrecking of the ship determines 'she must fetch up somewhere, if it was only in hell.'<sup>29</sup>

### **Why Place So Much of Herself in Her Work?**

So why would Linskill feel compelled to place so much of her personal life within her fictional work? One potential solution to this may be that she lacked the creative ability to do anything else. As MacLeod notes of her in her obituary:

[W]hen she writes of any except her humble Yorkshire neighbours, or of a heroine for whose feelings and character must go beyond her own sphere, she gives an impression of unreality, and of drawing upon an exalted and refined imagination, rather than on any knowledge or experience.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 44.

<sup>27</sup> As noted in Paul M. Chapman, *Birth of a Legend: Count Dracula, Bram Stoker and Whitby* (York: G H Smith & Son, 2007), p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Arrow Books Limited, 1973), p. 81.

<sup>29</sup> Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> MacLeod, *Good Words*, p. 480.

When not writing about what she knew, in other words, her fictions read as just that: fictions: false creations which the novel reader found impossible to believe. Her real talent, as MacLeod observes, was in the demarcation of places and people which were known and loved by her:

[G]ive her a genuine Yorkshire original, and it is difficult to overestimate the subtlety of perception and the delicacy of delineation with which she draws the manner, the language, and the very thought of her dramatis personae. We seem to see with our own eyes all the individual characteristics – to watch the working of their faces and to enter into their very point of view with an almost painful sympathy.<sup>31</sup>

Mary Linskill was known as the ‘The Whitby Novelist’. As Jan Hewitt notes: ‘[o]ne reviewer described her as the “novelist of the North” whose characters were “portraits of Northern folk, as they who have lived among them will recognise, and her scenery is precisely what one recalls”’.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Linskill’s other biographers, David Humble and Arthur F. Quinlan, quoting an obituary, assert that ‘what Mr Hardy is to the West Country, Mary Linskill might have been to the North Riding of Yorkshire.’<sup>33</sup> Mary Linskill associated herself with the town of Whitby, and in some ways, the town came to define both her and her work. She belongs to the town, as do her characters:

‘Do you live at Hild’s Haven?’

‘Yes,’ said Dorigen, with a certain pride discernible beneath her quiet manner. ‘Yes; we have always belonged to Hild’s Haven.’<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> MacLeod, *Good Words*, pp. 480-1.

<sup>32</sup> Jan Hewitt, ‘The “Haven” and the “Grisly Rokkes”’: Mary Linskill’s Dangerous Landscapes and the Making of Whitby’ in *Northern Landscapes: Representations and Realities*, ed. by Thomas Faulkner, Helen Berry & Jeremy Gregory (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Boydell Press, 2010), p. 280.

<sup>33</sup> Detailed in David Humble & Arthur F. Quinlan, *Mary Linskill: The Whitby Novelist*, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 258; own emphasis.

During Dorigen's (and Mary Linskill's) childhood, the town was 'an undiscovered place, alike unknown of artists, tourists, speculators, or Railway Kings. Yet the charm of the old haven was not the less strong and striking because no one painted it, or sang of it, or wrote of it.'<sup>35</sup> As the narrator observes: '[i]t was a beautiful place to have been born in, beautiful with history, and poetry, and legend – with all manner of memorable and soul-stirring things.'<sup>36</sup> Further, Dorigen's sense of belonging to the town provides her, as an author, with the authority to write in the first place. The narrator elucidates Dorigen's emotions upon this matter thus:

All her life the instinct [to write] had been there; some knowledge of it had been hers from the morning when she had sat at her father's feet in the Abbey of St. Hild, and had heard from his lips the story of the 'Inspiration of Caedmon.'<sup>37</sup>

In a moment of striking similarity between Caedmon's visitation by the angel which foretells that he must compose poetry, the Rector of the town, in a moment of dark mysticism, prophecies the great work that Dorigen must undertake:

'If I do not mistake, you have other work to do in this life – work which will need the utmost effort you can give.' Then he stopped a moment, looking out across to where the dark mystic sky seemed to melt into the darker and more mystic sea.

'Yes; you will have other work to do,' he said, standing there, and speaking as if he were but reading from the great book that was open before his eyes. 'You will live, and you will work, and your work shall live also, and it shall do good when I am dead, and my *sermons are forgotten.*' [...] So he spoke, standing on that self-same wind-swept headland, where the voice had spoken in the

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<sup>35</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 357.

night, calling Caedmon from the herdsman's hut to be the first poet of England.<sup>38</sup>

Conflating herself with Caedmon as the first English poet, Linskill directs her character to claim the 'same poetic fervour that Caedmon had'<sup>39</sup> as her birth right. If we are reading the text autobiographically, as Stamp does, then this reasoning surely applies to Linskill herself. Caedmon was the Whitby poet, as Linskill was the Whitby novelist. Linskill's art comes to justify her artistry.

### **Engaging with the Artistic Community through her Fiction**

During the early nineteenth-century, the town of Whitby was quiet and quaint. Even as late as 1870, when Charles Dickens's *All the Year Round* featured an article on the town, readers were advised: '[i]f you go to Whitby for quiet, assuredly you get what you go for. Never was such a tranquil watering-place.'<sup>40</sup> However, the town was changing, and during Linskill's lifetime, the town would become a haven for writers and poets. Throughout the nineteenth-century, a distinguished list of famous authors visited – and gained inspiration from – the seaside resort. C. L. Dodgson (more popularly known as 'Lewis Carroll') stayed in Whitby during the summer of 1854. His very first literary works, a poem entitled 'The Lady of the Ladle' and a mock-romantic story entitled 'Wilehelm von Schmitz' appeared in the *Whitby Gazette* from the end of August to the end of September 1854.<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell stayed there during 1859, and wrote the novel she described as 'the saddest novel I ever wrote'<sup>42</sup>, *Sylvia's Lovers*. During the summer of 1861, Wilkie Collins stayed at The Royal Hotel on the West Shore, writing part of his sensationalist novel, *No Name*

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<sup>38</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, pp. 163-4.

<sup>39</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 320.

<sup>40</sup> Anon., 'Whitby: Its Works and Ways', *All The Year Round*, 4.88, (6 August 1870), 228-232 (p. 228).

<sup>41</sup> As noted by Hahn & Robins, *The Oxford Guide to Literary Britain & Ireland*, p. 239.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell on *Sylvia's Lovers*. Quote cited in Josie Billington, 'Sylvia's Lovers' in *The Literary Encyclopaedia*, <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=1763>>

there.<sup>43</sup> George Du Maurier was also a regular visitor to the town and his many humorous illustrations of it and its inhabitants, such as ‘The Viqueens of Whitby’ of 1883, were featured in *Punch* magazine. Violet Hunt, a socialite and author of two collections of ghost stories, also visited the area; and this is before we even reach Whitby’s most famous visitor, Bram Stoker.<sup>44</sup> His holidays in the town during the latter years of the century informed his decision to site Whitby as the landing place for his eponymous Count Dracula, ultimately making the town more celebrated than most seaside towns.

From the early years of the nineteenth-century, the town was transformed into a thriving community of artists; a community to which Linskill, as a bona fide resident of Whitby, even as a minor Victorian novelist, had a justifiable claim of belonging. Linskill reached out to this community of artists through her own art. As Sutherland notes of the Victorian novelist: ‘Novel writing [...] was unique in Victorian society in being a public and professional activity open both to middle-class men and middle-class women on more or less equal terms.’<sup>45</sup> Although seemingly living a life much retired from society (there is certainly no evidence that Linskill ever socialised or met with the glittering literary visitors to the town detailed above), Linskill engaged on equal terms with these artists through her fiction. *The Haven Under the Hill* opens a dialogue with literary giants such as Tennyson and Browning, complimenting their works and acting as literary critic when giving her character’s opinions upon them. In the following scene, for example, Dorigen meets with a well-established and renowned author visiting the town. In Dorigen’s absence, the writer and his male friend discuss her poetry in the following terms:

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<sup>43</sup>As detailed by David Barnett, ‘In Praise of Whitby: Britain’s Spookiest Town’, *The Guardian*, (30<sup>th</sup> October 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Also detailed by Barnett, ‘In Praise of Whitby’.

<sup>45</sup> John Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers*, p. 159.

‘And yet you say the poems are good.’

‘They are very good. There are faults in them, of course, technical and other; but they have that true poetic quality which one writer will name individuality, another sentiment, while a third will attribute the charm to some virtue of style. To my thinking her secret lies in her moods, the mood in which a poem has been written before certainly communicated to the reader if the expression be forcible enough, and felicitous enough to convey it. To me that is the most striking difference between the two great poets of the time, Tennyson and Browning.

‘Browning is the greater, greater far as a thinker; and has more of the poet’s true force and fire.’

‘But I am constrained to admit, half against my will, that Tennyson has in a greater degree the power of entering into a certain finely poetic mood, and taking you into it with him. And he can do it in marvellously little space. Take that brief poem, “St. Agnes’ Eve,” as an instance of what I mean. Nothing can be simpler; there is no straining after effort; and yet how completely one is carried into the atmosphere of that convent where the dying girl is laid! You see the very shadow with its sharp slant line creeping over the snow that is upon the roof; you feel the chill of the frosty moonlit and starlit night; and then you enter; and if you never felt before what the ecstasy of a dying saint might be you feel it now, pure, intelligible, spiritual ecstasy. And all that is done in thirty-six brief lines.’<sup>46</sup>

Linskill has performed a species of literary sleight of hand here. Equality between Victorian authors aside, there would never be any question of Linskill as a minor female novelist passing comment on the poetry of these literary leviathans. However, by having her ‘male’ characters pass their views on the poetry of Tennyson and

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<sup>46</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 332.



Browning, Linskill can quite legitimately voice her own opinions. There is no question that this passage is non-fiction. Why would she make this up and substitute her own views for fictional ones in a paragraph such as this? Far easier to record her own thoughts and views upon the poetry in question.

### **Her Fiction as a Vehicle to Respond to her own Literary Critics**

Her art also provides Linskill with a voice to answer her own literary critics. Within a lengthy conversation with Michael about the critical reception of her novel, Dorigen informs him:

‘Look there! Seven reviews already, and only one severe one!’

‘I shall not read the severe one.’

‘But I should wish you to read it. It is amusing as well as severe. The charges brought against me are three. Firstly, I don’t know anything of the dialect; secondly, I have spoken of “the hot, tremulous summer air,” and the reviewer wishes to know if I ever saw it tremble! Poor man! Fancy the life he must have lived if he has never seen the vibration of the air above the meadows and the cornfields on a July afternoon. Thirdly, I am charged with making the sun set over the sea on the coast of Yorkshire.’

‘Which it does, of course.’

‘For some five or six weeks at midsummer. But one couldn’t expect a stranger to the coast to know that. The amusing thing is that he has made so much of it. Listen!

“When we were young we were taught that the sun set in the west, but it seems that things are altered since that distant day. Or it may be merely the geographical position of Yorkshire that is altered, and that it now has a western seaboard as well as an eastern one.”

So he goes on, growing funnier and funnier over this “absurd mistake.”<sup>47</sup>

Within The Athenaeum’s review of *Carl Forrest’s Faith*, a novel which preceded The Haven Under the Hill by approximately two years, the reviewer criticises Linskill for both her description of the landscape, which the reviewer terms as a ‘bleak land’ and the heavy Yorkshire dialect she employs for some of her characters which forces the main character, Reverend Egerton Forrest, ‘to grapple with [his] parishioners in their own conceit.’<sup>48</sup> The novel which immediately preceded The Haven Under the Hill, *Between the Heather and the Northern Sea*, was generally well received, although The Athenaeum again criticised Linskill for her dialogue.<sup>49</sup> Linskill’s novel, then, provides Linskill with a forum to confront and respond to her critics, even mocking them for their lack of local insight and knowledge.

On a more serious note, she (again in the guise of Dorigen) begs her critics to take account of the ‘circumstances under which the work criticised has been produced’, again associating herself with the artistic community as she does so:

You shall be asked to witness Beethoven composing the grandest and greatest of his works while harassed by the smallest of cares, the meanest of domestic worries. You shall be permitted to see Burns producing his living song worn by bodily suffering, tortured by pecuniary anxiety, nay, more, by the pangs of conscience for the misdeeds of his youth. You shall be invited to look upon Carlyle, struggling to deliver himself of his noblest ideas while fretted by ill-health, sleeplessness, social incompatibility, and by extremes of nervous exhaustion, the result of overwork. You shall have these and a thousand other such instances brought to

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<sup>47</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 425.

<sup>48</sup> Anon., ‘Kate Temple’s Mate’, *The Athenaeum*, No. 2922, (27 October 1883), 528-9 (p. 528).

<sup>49</sup> Anon., ‘Great Porter Square: A Mystery’, *The Athenaeum*, No. 2979, (29 November 1884), 691-2 (p. 692).

your notice, and you shall be asked to take these untoward accidents most seriously into account, as being the lions that stood in the pathway of genius that is dead, lions that did but stand there to prove the courage, the resolution, the grandeur of soul which marked that vanished victor over the world and its manifold hindrances.<sup>50</sup>

‘Manifold hindrances’ which Linskill knew all too well. ‘[N]ovel-writing’, she pleads, ‘is not quite the easy art it may seem to some to be.’<sup>51</sup> This is particularly true of the circumstances which Dorigen (and Linskill) both worked under. Crushed by poverty and loneliness, Linskill ended her life so utterly destitute that McLeod in his obituary for her concluded his article with a charitable plea on behalf of the author’s mother: ‘We have been asked to solicit help for Miss Linskill’s aged mother, who is left by her daughter’s death, in absolute poverty, her remaining children not being in a position to help her.’<sup>52</sup> It is all too easy to compare Dorigen’s ultimate fate of a lonely, impoverished death with the same lonely, impoverished death which was awaiting the author, just a few short years away. From the little we know of Linskill’s solitary forlorn life beset by anxiety over money and other cares for her destitute family, Linskill could easily have been talking to herself when Dorigen cautions herself:

‘It is not for me, that social world,’ she said to herself. ‘And I am not for it. I have passed through the fire, and I have come out too much scorched to care for contact with people upon whose garments there is not even the smell of burning.’<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 348.

<sup>51</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 337.

<sup>52</sup> MacLeod, *Good Words*, p. 482.

<sup>53</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 434.

## Conclusions

There is no denying that *The Haven Under the Hill* lends itself to be read autobiographically, and one cannot blame Stamp for quoting from this book heavily as a source for her biographical work. If Stamp is guilty of any error in her recording of Linskill's biography, it is of constructing a romanticised life from Linskill's fictions; perhaps the author, as the author wished to see herself, rather than corresponding to Linskill's actual lived reality. As has been shown, Stamp glossed over, or ignored, uncomfortable truths about Linskill's real life such as her addiction to narcotics, her many broken promises to editors and her frequent failures to meet her writing deadlines and responsibilities. As is suggested by this paper, however, it is remarkably tempting to read the impoverished author 'Mary Linskill' into the character of impoverished writer 'Dorigen Gower' of *The Haven Under the Hill*. Her use of autobiographical material and known historical events, such as her attendance at the Leeds Music Festival in 1883, all seem to corroborate Stamp's reliance upon this novel for historical research, and in some measure excuse it.

Similarly, there seem to be good reasons exhibited within the text for Linskill to blur the boundary between art and reality in this novel. Her use of the novel to reach out and engage with the artistic community and to answer her critics, as well as proving her own authority as an author belonging to the area she knew and loved the best, are just some of these. '[R]eality,' Dorigen tells us, 'is so much more interesting than fiction.'<sup>54</sup> With this novel, it is hard to determine where the boundary lies between that fiction and reality.

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<sup>54</sup> Linskill, *The Haven Under the Hill*, p. 269.