

BIOFICTIONS AS PART OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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My paper focuses on an increasingly popular segment of contemporary fiction, namely novelistic refashioning of past stories and people's lives in literary biographies and biofictions. These texts exhibit diverse appropriations of facts, fictional characters, novels, conventions, motifs, all assisting in establishing correspondences between the past and the present in various ways.

My study steps towards the blending of the traditional critical theory and the creative practice, theory and craft of the new postmodern fiction. It stages a theoretical and practical enquiry in the double, hybrid functions of the texts as historical and practical.

Biography and Biographical fictions

Biographies capture the essence of the person's life highlighting its features. The biographer's task involves entering the hidden personal myth of the subject, they have to read psychological signs, gather psychological evidence and approach their subject with the right questions. According to Edel biography begins to become more than a recital of fact, more than a description of individual's minute doings, more than a study of achievement when we allow ourselves to glimpse the myths within and behind the individual, the inner myth we all create in order to lives

Biography is claimed by the domain of both history and literature. It can be understood by the conventions of both fields and has the notion of duty to the truth. In postmodern literature this traditional role is somewhat changed. Biography serves as the fundamental tool of literature, culture, media as well as history, psychology and the social sciences. Writing a historical fiction requires an alchemical blend of library-based research, educated guess-work and intuition. Can such fiction be an approximation, a dramatic interpretation based on the best information possible. This attempt is cast not as a reconstruction but as a construct which aspires through merging historical research and writerly craft to approach some conception of another self-experience. The text offers readers the opportunity to experience impressions of other subjectiveness while the autobiographical strand signals very clearly that such an

opportunity is mediated through the author's concerns, interpretations, morality, philosophy, political persuasion and social and temporal position.

"Biographies are, after all, plots shaping and structuring the idea of a life; and literary biographies are the plots of the lives of plotters, who are likely to leave some trace in the biography of their own professional sense of plot's strange ambiguities. (Bradbury, "The Telling Life: Some Thoughts on Literary Biography", 1988:139 cited in Benton 2009).

To illustrate the constructedness of the past, biographers use postmodern concepts like metafictionality, fragmentation, intertextuality self-reflexivity and genre-building. According to Hermione Lee, to ascribe a single, neat definition of biography is hard to do. Often different terms like life-writing, life-history, memoir or profile are used to denote what it is. It involves comparisons to history, quests of journeys, detective work, obituaries, documentaries, gossip, scenes in a play, excavations as a fishing net or a work of fiction.

The issues biography addresses involve a questionable ethics of biographical research with its intrusiveness into the private sphere of the subject, the problem of authenticity, the biographer's employment of unreliable sources like memory, memoirs, letters and diaries. Preference is shown to the famous, glamorous and notorious. Key role plays the biographer's empathy with the subject and its consequential distortive ramification for an "objective" and "truthful" account of the biographee. The biographer's role is characterized by "pursuit" and "haunting" in the process of creation. The "pursuit" entails the tracking of the physical trail of someone's path in the past, following their footsteps. After the figure is brought imaginatively alive, the biographer becomes the pursued. The subject becomes the main preoccupation of the imagination. The biographer's capacity for imaginative empathy is continuously interacting within verifiable historical data. Postmodern biographers may inherit a different package of past information including a whole other biography. They turn into literary archeologists.

Postmodernism prefers uncertainty, ambiguity and fragmentation where the unreliability of biographical knowledge is accentuated by postmodernism.

Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings and upon the act of writing gathering form the past and from others speculatively casting into the future. The discourses identifying themselves as statements of the poetics of postmodernism as the function of the poetics is the paraphrase. It questions how was, how should and how could the novel (the biofiction) been made. First it examines the fact and postmodernism, then it traces metafiction and then follows an interrogation of literary biography as a genre.

Metafiction shows its own structure, talks about itself and demonstrates itself as a fiction. The postmodern authors ask the readers for their active participation. Their willing suspension of disbelief is no longer required and they do not have to be passively involved into the fictitious world of the postmodern, nor does it completely resemble the real world. What novelists do is exploring contingent reality and not a structured order. For Hutcheon, the combination between historiography and metafiction is what completes the poetics of postmodernism. "Historiographic" entails the critical interest in history and the writings of history. What historiographic metafiction does is using metafiction to underscore the construction of history producing a literary artifact. It draws attention that past is understood by texts, and texts of historical sources are intertextual. The world and reality are understood by the products of culture. Its cultural representations in the narratives is what makes our knowledge of the world and so postmodernism turns to one of its fundamental techniques, the intertextuality. The intertextual parody shows the world and its past as seen in its texts. Past is still incorporated in the present but periodically questioned.

Historiographic metafiction subverts through irony not through rejection. Postmodern novels challenge the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness by both installing coherent subjectivity and subverting it. The tenets of our dominant ideology (to which we, perhaps somewhat simplistically, give the label "liberal humanist") are what is being contested by postmodernism: from the notion of authorial originality and authority to the separation of the aesthetic from the political. (Hutcheon 2009: xii). Postmodernism entails cultural practices with ideological subtext which determines the conditions of their production of meaning. Thus, in art, the contradictions between its self-reflexivity and its historical grounding are being open for new meanings. Postmodernism is either neoconservatively nostalgic/reactionary or radically disruptive/revolutionary.

A very important part of literary culture is the biofictions. Biofictions as such have become a very interesting and diverse field of study on the literary scene. These narratives combine the traditional biographical forms with modern and postmodern concepts. All of the capacities fact and fiction offer are being implemented in biofiction and how our mind conceives the world around us. Biofictions combine the desire to create something spectacular and the uncertainties and the blanks that appear in the presentation of biographical facts. And so the potential of biofictions has been developed. Both biofictions and biography are narrative genres that use elements to encode the message in text which in turn will be decoded by the receiver, i.e. the reader. The vehicle to bring the message across is either functionalize

biography or biographical fiction. It is especially interesting how biofictions interplay with the inherent differences between fact and fiction. Biofictions are self-reflexive as they reflect on their own creative process. The postmodern pattern of biofictions is the deconstruction and demystification of long-established values and beliefs, they also emphasize the zest for life and the immense originality that underlines these fictions, that challenge “the authority” or “the above”. Biofictions resist categorisations because they blur genre distinctions and transgress the boundary between fact and fiction. Linda Hutcheon claims that there is not one truth but there are other truths which depend on the subjective perception of the narrator. Historical facts are laid upon the reader as two timelines and the reader can compare “historical events” with contemporary interpretation of events. The constructedness into contemporary counterparts, the past imitates the future. The authors of biofiction scrutinize the conventions of contemporary biography and the methods of biographers. How does the biographer get access to the subject’s literary legacy? It depends on the biographer’s intellectual processes of selection, manipulation and interpretation of historical documents such as letters, diaries and manuscripts. To rewrite or represent history in postmodern fiction means to open up the past to the present and prevent it from being conclusive (Hutcheon, *Poetics*:110).

Historiographic metafiction can be identified as an archetypal postmodern genre. History is presented as if it was fiction and the invented or the fictional is depicted as if was historical. While teasing us with the existence of the past as real, historiographic metafiction also suggests that there is no direct access to the real which would be unmediated. It highlights the novel as artificiality and makes us doubt reconstructions of the past or of “lives”. Therefore, it is the perfect medium to deconstruct long-established assumptions about biography and question the biographer’s method. In biofictions we see the clashing of genres at its best. Biofictions can be regarded as a postmodern skepticism towards biography, the biographical methods and representations. They go so far as to highlight the interaction between the past and the present and dwell on the question whether the past can be known or penetrable. It is highly concentrated on re-writing and re-imagining the past and past-present continuum is established. Fictional biographers are usually depicted as vultures that hover over the remains of the helpless artist. They combine the fictional seductive traits and the destructive effects of historiographic self-consciousness. The biographer’s practical, ethical, and aesthetic uses of fact, fiction, truth, gossip, myth in fashioning the subject, a postmodern awareness and legitimizing of generic experimentation that affords the biographer’s innovative re-conceptions of an apprehension of the subject.

Literary Biography

Literary biography is a postmodern literary structure on lives of writers and artists that combines document facts with strong narrative impulse. It is a narrative product that inclines and declines from its historical necessities and its narrative characteristics leaving open the question of biographical “truth”. Narrative, in other words is a discourse that may be generated in history or fiction –even in the blending of the two genres – in which the crucial element is the time (Benton 2009:18). Literary biographies comprise life histories that are, by definition, incomplete and open to discussion. This put the authors of the literary biography in an ambivalent position. They are charged with the responsibility to present and account for the spectrum of the life from cradle to grave, yet equally expected to give point, significance and interest to that life through narrative modes of representation which are often more readily associated with fiction and which, in the biographer’s interpolations and gap-filling, are constantly edging in that direction. In the writing process, the literary biographer is continuously moving between a conception of events that have occurred ‘prior to entextualisation’ and their representation as ‘created by and with the text (Benton 2009:19).

The literary biographer is caught between the demand to record the life history of the biographee with a dispassionate account of the facts and the demand to tell it as an engaging subject of literary development. In the literary biography unlike in biography, the author is not naked, but he can make use of a narrator and offer a further dimension in storytelling. By means of that, he can provide authorial comments on people’s motives and actions. In some degree or other, all biographies depict the biographer as well as the biographee, but it is only in literary biography that readers carry three images in their heads: one of the biographer and two of the subject (Benton 2009:28).

There is another difference between biography and fiction and it is the timeline. The “life narrative” covers a longer period and flows at a different pace from the “literary narrative”. Dates and events in a biography may be flattened into a steady procession, or it can involve longer inserts of experiences of the subjects and others involved, followed by a mixture of continuity and stillness, anticipation and memory, routine and surprise, a mixture that is likely to be particularly significant in the biography of a person’s life.

In the creation of the hybrid form and the cross-bred of facts and the arts of narrative, the author has to mediate the historical events with their subsequent historical description. Namely, the literary biographer is opened up to the issues of authenticity and ethics, i.e how

far can he go and how much can and should he reveal in the creation of his factual and fictional truth. In this respect, literary biographers go beyond the usual tendencies of representation of historical facts. Thus, they fictionalize facts from the past constructing a tale they wish to tell. By reconstructing the past, they construct the fiction. The author implies his own truth as much as another author would do on the same subject. And in this respect, both texts would be true to themselves and postmodern literary standards and the only untruth would be to claim one of them to be “absolute”.

“Literary biography will continue to raise questions which need to be answered again and again – about the relationship between fact and truth, and between information and interpretation, as well as about the nature of personality and the relationship between writers and their writings. We should not see biography as a failed empirical science striving to produce definitive, objective results but doomed to failure. Nor should we take the extreme post-modernist line which completely collapses the distinction between biography and fiction, regarding both as undifferentiated ‘textual constructs’. Instead, we should regard it as an amphibious art form, which ideally has both to obey the constraints of evidence and to respond creatively to the challenge of making shape, form and meaning” (Lucasta Miller, 2001: 169 cited in Benton 2009:34)The literary biographer presents the available facts of life shaping their arbitrariness, unitedness and incompleteness into an engaging whole. This works for the readerly appeal in the prospect of both gaining documentary information, scrupulously researched and plausibly interpreted, and of experiencing the aesthetic pleasure of reading a well-made work of art with a continuous life story and a satisfying closure. The invitation of the genre is made up of the triangling the roles of the biographer, the biographee within the biographical text and the reader.

Conclusion

The current fascination with biographical fictions and literary biographies poses the question of how aware are the authors of contemporary developments in the practice and theory of biofiction. They confront the readers with the deconstruction of biographical conventions. We as readers inevitably take part in the biographer’s quest to find out the truth about the biographee. Yet, in doing so they make us realize that an “authentic” portrayal is impossible. Can the readers realize whether the idea of a truthful and complete representation is fallible? We are confronted to our perceptions of history, of the past and life-writing.

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