

## **Biography as the Less Truthful Form – Contemporary British Biographic Metafiction**

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### **Abstract**

“Biographic metafiction” is a term used to denote novels whose theme is the exploration of the process of biographical writing. The main protagonist either decides or is commissioned to compose a biography of another person and, despite his/her serious and strenuous efforts, eventually in some way fails in this project. Biographic metafiction is a category of historiographic metafiction as it also draws on postmodernist and poststructuralist doubt concerning the availability of historical truth and the consequent impossibility of its appropriate representation in language. The genre has been especially popular since the 1980s, though far less so than works dealing with history and getting to know the past in general. Using the most exemplary biographic metafiction in British literature of the past three decades, this article shows both the genre’s characteristic features as well as the differences between its individual representatives, and also compares it with a thematically related body of contemporary fiction known as “romances from the archive”.

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**Keywords:** Biography, Biographic Metafiction, Historiographic Metafiction, historical truth, textual representation.

Novelists tend to be repulsed by and attracted to the literary biographer, who is both kindred spirit and antagonist, reviver and executioner, exalted Boswell, and the “lice of literature”.

Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost*

### **Introduction – Historiographic and Biographic Metafiction**

One of the most acute queries that postmodernist and poststructuralist theories have instigated and addressed is that of the need for a thorough revision of the relationship between history and its textual representation. Drawing on the inevitable bias of the author, along with the determining role

of language, especially the major figures of speech and other commonly used literary devices, in shaping bygone events into a coherent and intelligible textual account, and the fact that the past can only be accessed in an indirect, mediated way in the form of various texts, theoreticians suggest that no attempt at transforming history into a narrative can claim to be objective, unequivocal and therefore indisputable. Moreover, they emphasise not only the essentially literary character of history, but also how its textual representations reflect and are linked with the distribution of power in society at the time they were produced. Accordingly, they point out that no such text is “innocent” in the sense of being devoid of a specific purpose, agenda, or inherent value system, which are always defined in relation to the official establishment which they, more or less explicitly, support or oppose.

These propositions have proved very inspiring for contemporary fiction which has been trying to challenge the seemingly unproblematic, corresponding relationship between the past and its narrative account, between history and (hi)story-telling. The body of works addressing this issue has prompted literary scholars and critics to conceive a separate genre of historiographic metafiction which focuses on what history (and in consequence historiography) and fiction have in common rather than on how the two modes of writing differ. It by no means denies the existence of a past reality but is sceptical about “our ability to (unproblematically) know that reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language” (Hutcheon, 1992: 119). Espousing the maxims of plurality and heterogeneity of perspectives, discourses and modes of expression, historiographic metafiction strives to (re)present history not as a conclusive, totalising construct, but as an incessant process of projection and revision open to the present and to its contestation. Such works thus “both install and then blur the line between fiction and history” (Hutcheon, 1992: 113) by employing a variety of playful and potentially subversive techniques and strategies, such as intertextuality, metafiction, parody, pastiche and the questioning of narrative authority. Even though some earlier predecessors could no doubt be found, the origins of this genre in Britain date to the 1960s, namely to the works of Anthony Burgess and John Fowles, and has particularly flourished since the 1980s in the works of authors such as Julian Barnes, Peter Ackroyd, Graham Swift, Salman Rushdie, A.S. Byatt, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Waters and Michel Faber.

Biography can be said to be a specific subgenre of historiography as it also faces the challenge of how to credibly and enticingly, while also as truthfully as possible, (re)present the past, in this case an individual’s life and work, within the limited space of a book. Generally speaking, biographers have to cope with problems similar to those of historians and historiographers, such as the absence of solid or verified facts, the

questionable authenticity of available pieces of evidence, the lack of credibility of witnesses' testimonies, and the need to find connections for the sake of the narrative where none are offered by historical records and evidence. It is noteworthy that while there have been a number of novels dealing with the past and the (im)possibility of its appropriate representation in language and the often indistinct and permeable borderline between history and fiction, those concerned with biographies and the toils and pitfalls of their writing are considerably more rare yet no less interesting as they are part of a more general tendency in contemporary fiction to show interest in "the powerful grip that earlier writers exert over later writers, whether real or imaginary" and "the complex aesthetic and intellectual reasons for these writers' preoccupation with the worlds and works of their predecessors" (Savu, 2009: 10), by means such as intertextuality, metafiction, pastiche and parody.

Novels by British authors that explore the theme of biography writing, like Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Penelope Lively's *According to Mark* (1984), William Golding's *The Paper Man* (1984), Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (1987), Kingsley Amis's *The Biographer's Moustache* (1995), A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), Michael Palin's *The Truth* (2012), or Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word* (2014), share several crucial characteristic features. Prominent among them is what Hans Bertens (1996) identifies as "a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense" (11), and can therefore be classified as examples of what may be labelled "biographic metafiction"<sup>95</sup>, a subgenre of historiographic metafiction. At the same time, however, the individual works reveal certain distinctive, idiosyncratic features that do not allow them to be approached as a uniform, monolithic generic category. With reference to the above mentioned novels, this article attempts to explore the particularities of this genre and how it both reflects and defies the major postmodernist inquiries.

### **Biography as the Art of Nonfiction Storytelling**

One of the crucial common denominators of works of biographic metafiction is that they treat the genre of biography, and in consequence biographers, sceptically and ironically, if not downright mockingly. In this regard they differ from other works of historiographic metafiction which, though they also employ irony as a productive narrative device and perspective, do not tend to ridicule or look down on the protagonists.

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<sup>95</sup> The term "biographic metafiction" is not the only one used for this kind of fiction as Matt Seidel (2014), for instance, speaks of the "literary biography novel" and Ansgar Nünning (2005) of the "fictional metabiography", but I consider it the most fitting given the particularities of this genre.

Biographers, on the contrary, are not treated with such magnanimity and benevolence, chiefly because their obsession to get to know and narrate someone's past is a voluntary act rather than a necessity. Biography as such, however, also plays its part as it seems to particularly irritate writers and provoke them to satirically banish it from the realm of serious literature. These novels thus evince a typical postmodernist paradox when a still young, and largely parasitic, genre belittles and vilifies that of an incommensurably greater tradition and pedigree.

Biography has gone through a very long development full of changes and variations as its roots go back to Ancient Greece and Rome with their accounts of the lives of great personalities whose example could teach the reader a lesson. In the Medieval period this tradition was continued in hagiographies celebrating the lives and deeds of the saints. This tendency towards idealising biographies was challenged in the eighteenth century with its demand for "vivid realism and intimacy" (Lee, 2009: xiv). The most significant personality in this regard was Samuel Johnson who rejected the hagiographic approach in favour of "the minute details of daily life" and "those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness" (quoted in Donaldson, 2015: 1), embracing virtues as well as vices. The puritan and conservative Victorians turned the biographic current back again with their solid and instructive "Lives and Letters" of prominent public figures in which officially appointed biographers from among close friends, admirers or family members presented their subjects in the noblest and most exemplary manner, avoiding any hints of potential deficiency or indecency, thus following Thomas Carlyle's assertion that "[t]he history of the world is but the biography of great men". Modernist authors responded to this Victorian moral hypocrisy by taking biography as an art form, emphasising the importance of laying bare the facts, yet only those the biographer finds significant according to the principle of artistic selectivity. The influence of Sigmund Freud and his philosophy changed life-writing once and for all, redirecting its attention from polite moderation and reticence and the biographee's public and working life towards intimate revelation of taboo subjects. The second half of the twentieth century then witnessed "the 'Golden Age' of long, professional, candid, post-Freudian" biography (Lee, 2009: xiv). However, this approach did not automatically guarantee quality. The excessive focus on the intimate aspects of the subject's most private life, the more scandalous the better, sometimes resulted in the presentation of a vast amount of unnecessary and largely irrelevant details in better cases, in worse cases in sensational, gossipy, and mostly unauthorised works of what Joyce Carol Oates, using Freud's terminology, called "pathography" (Donaldson, 2015: 4).

Yet regardless of, and partly due to, these flaws biography has been enormously popular in recent decades, catering for people's natural curiosity about others' private lives as well as satisfying their desire to be assured that those more privileged and successful also have failings, worries, misfortunes and dark secrets. Mary Evans (1999) noticed an interesting paradox in that the late twentieth-century, hyper-consumer culture of intense conformity and standardisation provoked the need for various forms of articulation of difference, including literary and sub-literary ones. The contemporary "biography of revelation" thus evinces a shift "away from the demonstration of moral qualities towards the discussion and explanation of individual difference" (141). This tendency has resulted in the overproduction of biographies of almost all imaginable kinds of individual, which creates a problem of quality and necessitates searching for the rare instances of ingenious and well-researched biographical works among the heap of scandal and sensation-driven pieces. The majority of these superficially focus on the escapades of prominent representatives of popular culture, and facts and ideas often yield to anecdotes, rumours and speculations<sup>96</sup>. In spite of this, quality biographies are still written, exploring and charting the "illuminating connections between past and present, life and work" (Holroyd, 2013: 19), and even suggesting "a degree of social continuity and personal responsibility" (Kaplan quoted in Donaldson, 2015: 5), and which can therefore appeal to the reader without sentimentality or moralising.

However, there are some other problematic aspects surrounding biography as a genre, most importantly its very status: it is commonly classified as non-fiction, as it is supposed to work with facts and verified data, but it also inevitably involves a great deal of creative work by the author as these facts and data must be selected and ordered into a narrative. Writing an objective and consistent story of someone's life is therefore a myth produced in part by the form of biography itself, and in part by society and its compelling needs, particularly "to experience life as an organised and coherent process, in which rational choices are made" (Evans, 1999: 1). In reality, human life is too intricate and full of illogical and spontaneous twists and turns to be captured by a narrative model and in most cases the full truth about a person's life simply cannot be accessed, and the biographer is thus often forced to "suppose and infer" (Lee, 2009: 138), construct and

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<sup>96</sup> These works have done much disservice to the biography and its reputation and have provoked a Victorian-like outrage and calls for restoring the genre's moral credit by making the subject's private life off-limits even among contemporary critics. Janet Malcolm, the journalist and essayist from the *New Yorker*, for instance, compares the biographer who searches his/her subject's privacy to "the professional burglar" and claims that such a person cannot be "regarded as an honest and serious writer" (Hamilton, 2016).

reconstruct, which is why his/her work will always retain a trait of narrative fiction.

Some biographers themselves question the categorical status of their genre. Peter Ackroyd (2002) even suggests that, seemingly paradoxically, compared to a novelist the biographer enjoys a greater freedom to make things up. The novelist is bound to tell the truth in the sense that the product of his/her imagination must be genuine and convincing enough for the reader to accept it as a (fictional but still) reality. The biographer, on the other hand, has at his/her disposal narrative devices which help to conceal his/her lack of data, ignorance or confusion, such as ending a chapter abruptly and quoting a letter, diary or witness, which cannot be utilised by a novelist. That is why in essence the novel can be taken as a more truthful form than biography (367). Though opinions may differ, one thing remains certain – “[t]he biographer, like the novelist, is first and foremost a storyteller” (Donaldson, 2015: 49), and as such cannot avoid using imagination in shaping his/her materials into a story. As Michael Holroyd maintains, for the sake of retrieving information a mere listing of facts and data would be more efficient, but other narrative techniques, including creative ones, are justified “if you want the reader to come in contact with someone he has never met” (Cohen, 2013). He is also convinced that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction should not be so absolute and likes to refer to his biographic works as “nonfiction stories” (Cohen, 2013).

### **Seeing Connections in Life without Theory**

What also makes biography a problematic issue within the category of non-fiction is a contradiction lying at its very core: although it makes a claim to a certain amount of objectivity based on thoroughly researched materials and systematic working with verified facts and data, as a whole it is still a non-theoretical enterprise. The foundations of the genre as laid by Samuel Johnson consist of several underlying principles which particularly concern its position halfway between history and novel writing: the question of who deserves to have their biography written and which facts are appropriate to include in it, the moral responsibilities of biographers towards the subject, the public and the truth, and also the problem of the impossibility of knowing with certainty another person’s inner life (Monk, 2007: 529-530). No matter how crucial these principles are for biography, they by no means represent its comprehensive theory. However, the numerous later attempts to define and delineate the genre were in fact always built on Johnson’s ideas and therefore resulted in description rather than explanation, in presenting specific rules, pieces of advice and practical tips which, rather than providing a generalised concept by identifying a unifying principle that would apply to each work, focus on the particularities of biographic writing

and respond to its most imminent difficulties. Examples of these attempts are Hermione Lee's ten rules of biography (2009: 6-18) or Diane Middlebrook's three ethical responsibilities of a biographer (Donaldson, 2015: 68).

Following Benjamin Disraeli, who saw biography as "life without theory", Ray Monk (2007) thus suggests that biography shares concerns with philosophical inquiry about the world with regard to the nature and purpose of its endeavour rather than with scientific or scholarly theoretical methodology. In the preface to his *Eminent Victorians* (1818), Lytton Strachey expresses the same persuasion, that the biographer, like the historian, not only selects and presents facts, but his/her duty is also to "reveal the relations among the facts and, by doing so, transform mere compilation into a great work of art" (Monk, 2007: 539), that is to say, the interpretation of the discovered facts is a crucial part of the *art* of writing biography. What follows is that the biographer must assume a point of view in order to draw connections between facts and present them as he/she sees them, moreover in such a manner that enables the reader to make sense of the material on the biographical subject. The biographer's point of view thus represents a "way of understanding the facts" (Monk, 2007: 540), which corresponds with neither theoretical enterprise nor fiction writing. The biography's asset is that it allows us to access what and how other people think, to experience other examples of mental processes, other sets of pictures of reality which, according to Wittgenstein (and Strachey), "get us to see things differently" (Monk, 2007: 566).

However, seeing things from different perspectives does not mean that a factual account should give way to pure imagination, nor that various points of view should automatically be ascribed the same value: interpretations must be governed by the facts, and yet some of them may be viewed as being of better quality, in the sense of being more elaborate, insightful, convincing and coherent, than others. In any case, biography in its essence cannot offer impartiality but an opportunity to see "a self in a certain way" (Tridgell, 2004: 187). Therefore, Monk (2007) argues, biography eludes a unifying theoretical framework as it does not present any propositional argument and as such should be seen as an exemplar of Wittgenstein's notion of the "understanding that consists in seeing connections" (567), an interpretation of a person's life from the point of view of another. Accordingly, Holroyd uses the metaphor of biography as a chess game (Cohen, 2013) in which you cannot move the pieces arbitrarily because you are bound by the rules – the facts of the biographee's life – but by resourceful combinations of the permitted moves you can make the game more exciting and successful, that is the life story more authentic and gripping.

Still, the absence of theory makes biography a precarious task as the biographer has, except for some procedural and ethical principles, no solid ground on which to build the story of the subject's life. His/her professional self is therefore a complex amalgam of roles that someone else's biography requires: drudge, artist, critic, historian, investigative reporter, polymath, psychologist (Donaldson, 2015: 102-103). However, unlike most of the reading public, only a few of the biographers' literary colleagues and potential objects of interest seem to appreciate their efforts. The postmodernist critique of biography as an untrustworthy and unsophisticated construct of the human self, and the fact that it is far from a neutral ground but one that arouses emotional reactions mostly at the expense of its subject, are two of the reasons why novelists depict it sceptically and critically in their stories. Yet, other reasons suggest themselves: writers try to preserve their privacy which they feel is always violated when the biographer assumes a certain authority over their life; they are also afraid that the biographer would present a disparaging image of themselves which does not correspond either with how they see themselves or how they wish the public should see them; and, perhaps most crucially, they fear that compared to the rich and multi-layered world of their books their personal life would appear uneventful, insignificant or even deplorable, lacking in attractiveness, purport or moral integrity.

And so, in the eyes of many writers, biographers are dangerous interlopers "whose obsessive search for real-life parallels threatens the sanctity of the work of art" (Seidel, 2014), whose work is "a reductionist simplification, a grotesque travesty of what they do" (Lee, 2009: 98). Therefore, they speak of them as of tasteless parasites, obsessive pursuers, relentless hunters, perverted stalkers, or pathologists dissecting the self of those who can no longer fight back, giving their writing unflattering descriptions such as a "grey transit between domestic spasm and oblivion" (George Steiner), "one of the new terrors of death" (John Arbutnot), an act of "psycho-plagiarism" (Vladimir Nabokov), or "an unpardonable crime against selfhood" (Germaine Greer).

Some writers go even further and in order to secure and protect their reputation – during their lifetime as well as posthumously – they take preventive steps to discourage or drive away potential biographical intruders. These strategies may vary in terms of their craftiness, sophistication and determination. The most extreme is the destruction of as many biographical materials as possible, such as manuscripts, notes, letters, diaries, photographs and other personal belongings. A more subtle strategy is that of altering these materials or even creating fake ones so as to appear in a better light. Another strategy is to personally appoint one's biographer from a circle of credible and reliable people, such as close friends, family members or faithful

supporters. Of course, there is always the possibility of not trusting another person and simply writing an autobiography or memoir, or one's own biography under a pseudonym<sup>97</sup>. Moreover, there are numerous legal moves that can effectively ward off future biographers from meddling in the estate of the deceased person. And, last but not least, a few of these exasperated writers counterstrike and make a biographer either a scoundrel or a miserable, awkward and ludicrous anti-hero in their fiction, from which they may even derive "a small measure of sadistic satisfaction at turning the merciless biographer's gaze back on himself" (Seidel, 2014).

### **Biographers' Tales**

In principle, biographic metafiction sides with postmodernist and poststructuralist revisions concerning the (im)possibilities of gaining trustworthy knowledge about another person's life and transforming it into a text. Hinting at the tension and ironic interplay between the present and the past, it portrays biographic endeavours as reliant on coincidences and contingencies, and thus foregrounds the subjective, creative and interpretative role of the biographer who reconstructs rather than represents, and at times even constructs rather than reconstructs the life of a real historical individual. These works suggest that there is only a small correspondence between the biographee's real life and available accounts of it based on someone's memory and narrative capacity, and that the various versions of the subject's self are constructed by the involved individuals rather than impartially retrieved from the past (Nünning, 2005: 200-208). The main theme and subject matter of the genre is also reflected by some of its formal aspects which allow it to reflect and self-reflect the aesthetic and epistemological inquiries of biographical and meta-biographical writing and to "draw the reader's attention to the novel's status as a fictional text" (Steveker, 20), namely the multiple-perspective narration, dense intertextuality, mixture of genres and the use of parody and pastiche. At the same time, however, perhaps with the exception of *Flaubert's Parrot*, they are not experimental in the truly postmodernist sense as the process of composing another person's life account to some extent necessitates the backbone of a consequential plotline.

Generally speaking, there are two basic types of biography according to the physical "availability" of the subject: written posthumously or on a living person, each having advantages and drawbacks that result from the physical absence or presence of the biographee during the process of writing the biography. The first type can be further subdivided into biographies written on a relatively recently deceased person, which means that some of

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97 For some specific real-life examples of these strategies see Donaldson (2015), pp. 61-65.

his/her relatives, spouses, lovers, acquaintances, colleagues and rivals are still alive and can serve as sources of first-hand information which may otherwise be unattainable, and biographies on people who died earlier and the biographer can no longer make use of any eyewitness testimony. The process of writing all the mentioned types is put under scrutiny in the biographic metafiction under discussion.

Penelope Lively's *According to Mark* belongs to the second type, i.e. the subject is no longer alive but some of the people who were acquainted with him are. Mark Lemming is a biographer working on the life of Gilbert Strong, a recognised writer and a respected man of letters. While doing his research and gathering materials on Strong, he goes through his own mid-life crisis by having a short love affair with Strong's granddaughter Carrie, a nice-looking but unsophisticated gardener completely oblivious to literature and her grandfather's legacy, who is very much unlike Mark's knowledgeable, cultured and strong-willed wife. However, the story of a middle-aged writer, bored with his routine marriage, falling irrationally for a bland girl's looks before humbly returning to his wife is only one part of the plot. Even more important is the process of Mark's work on the biography. Going through the individual evolutionary stages of a maturing biographer's identity and encountering all the imminent pitfalls of the genre, Mark becomes a metaphor of a biographer and what it takes to write a good biography.

Mark sees himself as a serious biographer with no interest in gossip and scandals, whose aspiration is to present the lives of remarkable people not for academia but for the general reading public. He decides to write the biography because he was captivated by Strong's memoir, however, as he becomes familiar with the less known aspects of Strong's life he finds out that its disturbing side-effect has been "the gradual erosion of his faith in the memoir" which turns out to be "as unreliable as most testimony by anyone about anything" (Lively, 2011: 20-21). With each source of information he gets a distinct account of the subject's personality, ending up with one public Strong and a number of often disparate or even contradictory private Strong's. The more materials he gathers the more sceptical he becomes concerning the possibility of distilling from the vast heap a coherent and credible picture of the biographee's self. And so he realises that in the first place he needs to abandon utmost objectivity in favour of selectiveness and assuming a point of view, thus clearing away the unreliable, irrelevant or unverifiable pieces of evidence into the "Lies and silences" file and shaping the mass of information into a structured narrative. "Life, like history, is one and indivisible. That, of course, is the nature of its complexity and the reason why those brave enough to embark upon analyses thereof are obliged to chop it up into more manageable segments" (Lively, 2011: 50). Although Mark

prides himself on working methodically and systematically, which he finds the most effective weapon “against the disorderliness of the subject matter” (Lively, 2011: 100), facing the various versions of Strong not only discourages him from the enterprise but makes him doubt it as a whole, seeing the “obsessive shadowing of another man’s life” as “one of the more bizarre ways to spend one’s own” (Lively, 2011: 58).

However, a rich source of comedy in the novel rests in how the process of Mark’s investigation of Strong’s fortunes and personality affects and intertwines with his own life. In spite of his resolution to process the information about his subject with critical detachment, as the failures in his research and the mishaps in his personal life pile up his tendency to see Strong behind them increases. He blames Strong for his falling for Carrie, but also for manipulating and playing hide-and-seek with him from the start. Mark finds himself suspicious that Strong has been deliberately holding back from him significant pieces of information while providing only those which correspond with how he wished posterity would see him, thus leaving the biographer with too many “silences” and leading him astray from a truthful account of his life. It is only when he discovers that the cause of most of these silences was Strong’s deep personal tragedy – the sudden loss of the only woman he ever truly loved – that Mark realises he has known a different Strong until that point. Now that he is familiar with the most hidden intimacies of Strong’s life, instead of feeling triumphant and satisfied he feels guilty of an impertinent intrusion. And so he comes to understand that although indirectly his and Strong’s lives temporarily entwined it would be absurd to put the blame for his ill luck and mistakes on Strong, just as knowledge of another person’s experience may hardly “have a salutary effect on the management of one’s own affairs” (Lively, 2011: 198). The conclusion, however, is rather conciliatory towards biography: being acquainted with the most secret facts about his subject allows Mark to assume some of the wished for detachment, which revives his professional confidence and a vague belief that “maybe the whole activity is more sound than at times he has felt” (Lively, 2011: 211).

Substantially less successful in his enterprise is Phineas G. Nanson in A.S. Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale*. Having lost his belief in academic literary scholarship he resigns from his doctoral studies and on the advice of his supervisor embarks on the project of writing a biography of Scholes Destry-Scholes, a biographer who dedicated his life to writing about other people, particularly the Victorian polymath Sir Elmer Bole. Phineas becomes convinced that such a gifted and devoted biographer deserves a biography himself, but he soon discovers that although Destry-Scholes spent almost all his time searching for information and evidence about other persons’ lives he in fact left almost no tracks of his own, and his privacy remains shrouded in

mystery, including his alleged death by drowning off the coast of the Lofoten Islands in Norway. No matter how hard Phineas tries, all he ends up with are materials pointing to Destry-Scholes's work and research, not his life or personality. And so he gradually realises that he is no longer pursuing Destry-Scholes but those Destry-Scholes wrote about, which, like opening "a set of Chinese boxes" (McKee, 2001), only leads him to other people, whose existence might be intriguing but is of no relevance to that of his subject.

Even the two shoeboxes full of notes and photographs he gets from Destry-Scholes's niece Vera do not turn out to be much more helpful in this regard, yet, thanks to them he at least ascertains the nature of Destry-Scholes's unpublished research from the time before his disappearance: gathering information about and writing mutually interconnected biographical accounts of three historical personages whom Phineas identifies as Carl Linneanus, Francis Galton and Henrik Ibsen. However, to his surprise and disappointment, Phineas finds that even though they are as thoroughly and meticulously composed as his other biographical writings, they are in reality largely fictitious since "the biographer had quite deliberately woven his own lies and inventions into the dense texture of collected facts" (Byatt, 2001: 236). It is as if suddenly he discovers another Destry-Scholes, completely unlike the man of earnest biographical principles he thought he knew, who insisted that a biographer, unlike a novelist, works solely with facts and must therefore never fabricate. And although Phineas does not know whether Destry-Scholes's betrayal of his own professional rules was meant as "a wry comment on the hopeless nature of biographical accuracy" or whether it was "just a wild and whimsical kicking-over of the traces?" (Byatt, 2001: 236), this discovery casts doubt upon the whole body of Destry-Scholes's work, including the distinguished biography of Bole, and puts a definite end to Phineas' own biographical project.

Like Mark Lemming, Phineas at first hopes to assume a position of utmost detachment from his subject, but soon finds this hope to be naïve, idealistic, and untenable. Not only do his subjective ideas, values and preferences impact his processing of the collected facts and data, but his strenuous efforts to disclose something about the ever evasive Destry-Scholes also start to interfere in and steer his personal life, especially with regard to the two young women he falls for – the forthright Swedish bee taxonomist, Fulla, and the ethereal hospital radiographer, Vera – and while the life of the biographee proves obscure and undetectable, his own becomes all the more exciting and enjoyable. This also reflects in the book he is writing which turns out eventually to be an autobiographic account rather than a biography of Destry-Scholes, despite the fact that Phineas has repeatedly expressed outspoken disdain for the genre, calling autobiography "the most evasive and self-indulgent of forms", one that is "[s]lippery,

unreliable, and worse, imprecise” (Byatt, 2001: 214, 250). Phineas thus notices that his book in some way parallels Destry-Scholes’s triptych when the fictive narrative arises from the scholarly one because the urge to invent and speculate eventually overpowers the biographic imperative of relying on dry facts. He thus abandons his biography but does not give up writing as it has become for him an addiction and pleasure, expressing himself in those “forbidden words [...] theorists can’t use and writers can” (Byatt, 2001: 250), though he admits that merely being addicted to writing does not make one a writer. And so he keeps a diary recording his experiences from his travels, and the novel, which has been primarily concerned with biography, ends up as a paean to creative writing, to the diversity of human life and, most importantly, to the limitless richness of the natural world which, as Phineas concludes, “will always exceed our power to describe, or imagine, or understand it” (Byatt, 2001: 259).

The motif of a deceased person who resists becoming an unproblematic subject of biographic scrutiny can also be found in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. The difference in Barnes’s novel, which is technically not a novel but a playful and imaginative essay on the nature of truth and representation, is that the narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, is engaged in writing a biography of a real historical personage. However, the Gustave Flaubert that eventually arises from Braithwaite’s endeavours is not much less fictitious than Phineas G. Nanson’s Destry-Scholes. Braithwaite is well aware that Flaubert repeatedly insisted on the insignificance of the author’s personal life and protected his privacy from being explored for biographical purposes as he wanted to be judged only on the basis of his work, yet he cannot help himself and joins the line of “the believers, the seekers, the pursuers” (Barnes, 1985: 3) who disrespect the writer’s wish and again and again throw themselves into composing a coherent and compact image of someone who took deliberate steps to thwart any such future attempt. Although Braithwaite, unlike Nanson, cannot complain about a lack of leads, in effect he is no more successful: not only does he discover that some of these are false leads as they are not genuine and reliable, he also learns that each opens up a new area of the subject’s life and thus turns into a discouraging reminder of how much the biographer does not in fact know. He feels that his biographic project complies with the definition of a net as “a collection of holes tied together with string” (Barnes, 1985: 35): the biographer also “trawls” the personality of his subject in the net of collected, selected and ordered facts and data, but there is always far more of what evaded being caught. If he is not able to identify the right parrot from the writer’s desk, how can he be sure about the other, less palpable, traces?

There is one more significant realisation Braithwaite makes – that his desire to learn as much as possible about Flaubert is not his only, and not

even the primary, impulse for working on the biography, since what really drives him to impose order and meaning on his subject's life is his unfulfilled need to do the same with his own. His compulsion to comprehend why certain events have happened to him, especially his wife Ellen's recent suicide, thus transforms into his obsession with Flaubert's "real" life, the one outside the realm of his fiction: "Books are not life, however much we might prefer it if they were. Ellen's is a true story; perhaps it is even the reason why I'm telling you Flaubert's story instead" (Barnes, 1985: 95). He comes to understand that (textual) representation never fully captures and encompasses reality and that his task has no final, complete solution. This does not mean that his effort has been wholly fruitless as he has learnt something new about himself and certain defining aspects of human nature, such as unrelenting curiosity and the need to search for truth, no matter how unattainable that is in its pure form. "You cannot change humanity, you can only know it" (Barnes, 1985: 202), notes Braithwaite, well aware that an individual's personality and experience is impossible to extrapolate from this universal knowledge. And so, although after almost two years of investigation he still has not found the right parrot, he experiences feelings of reconciliation or even a kind of content rather than annoyance and futility, being "pleased and disappointed at the same time. It was an answer and not an answer; [...] Well, perhaps that's as it should be" (Barnes, 1985: 227). The novel thus, maybe paradoxically given its unrelenting critique of the genre, does not end with a call for resignation from the biographic quest for truth, but it revises its priorities and sees the process as being far more valuable than its outcome.

Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* also features a baffled life-writer in the character of Charles Wychwood, an unrecognised poet suffering from writer's block, who comes across a portrait of a middle-aged gentleman who strikingly resembles Thomas Chatterton, the famous forger poet who is believed to have killed himself by swallowing arsenic aged seventeen in 1770. Charles becomes obsessed with the painting and the sensational discovery it promises and decides to write a biography of Chatterton which would correct existing versions and once and for all establish him as one of the most influential figures behind English Romantic Poetry. His zeal intensifies with the discovery of documents apparently written at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which a mature Chatterton admits that he only faked his death and continued writing poetry under various pen names, including those of the most renowned Romantic poets. In the end, all the key traces, including the portrait and the documents, turn out to be forgeries, yet Ackroyd spares his protagonist the public shame of being a misguided and self-deceived biographer by letting him die of a brain tumour after a mock-mystical vision of Chatterton's ghost. Although biography

writing is not the main theme of *Chatterton*, which is primarily occupied with the question of (un)originality and (in)authenticity in art, it contributes to the discussion concerning the meaningfulness of this enterprise. It does defend its legitimacy, yet, in one breath, it emphasises the role of invention in its course. As Philip, Charles's best friend, notes, "[t]he important thing is what Charles imagined, and we can keep hold of that. That isn't an illusion. The imagination never dies" (Ackroyd, 1987: 232). Similarly to *Flaubert's Parrot*, the novel makes an argument in favour of biography as a process, only in this case it is appreciated for providing a stimulus for the imagination, whose creative power Ackroyd places high above the imperatives of originality or truthfulness.

Working on the biography of a living person brings its own problems and issues and can also be of two main types: either the biographee does not want to be the subject of such a project and takes various steps to discourage and prevent the biographer from continuing the work, or the biographee has given consent to this enterprise, though often later regrets this, and the biographer thus embarks on the work in collaboration with the subject. The first type can be found in William Golding's *The Paper Men* and Michael Palin's *The Truth*, the latter is rendered in Kingsley Amis's *The Biographer's Moustache* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word*.

*The Paper Men* explores a biographer-biographee relationship in its extremity. Wilfred Barclay is a famous elderly writer whose life is in crisis – unable to write any longer and his marriage dead, he has taken to drink to an extent bordering on alcoholism. Living off the profits from his novels, he has been wandering from one country to another, spending most of his waking time in hotel lobby bars drinking, eyeing up women and raking over his past. Yet he is denied peaceful enjoyment of this lifestyle by the young professor Rick L. Tucker, whose obsessive fascination with the writer and his work has grown into an obstinate and indomitable determination to write Barclay's official biography and become his literary executor. Even though Barclay's vanity is flattered by the offer, he declines Tucker resolutely, in part because he has been appalled at what Tucker is capable of doing in order to obtain information about his private life ever since he caught him secretly rifling in his dustbins, but mainly because of his fear of having his true self exposed to the public. It is not only that his life could be seen as "a movement from one moment of farce to another" (Golding, 2013: 58), but also because of some of the skeletons hidden in his closet, namely his not always honest dealings with women and an act of mean plagiarism of the central idea of one of his most successful novels. However, he soon comes to understand that the real farce of his life has just begun since no rejection is firm enough to stop Tucker in his self-appointed mission.

A chase around Europe begins in which Barclay is the prey, cherishing the hope of reversing roles and destroying his hunter, thus remaining in control of the story of his life. He employs a repertoire of strategies: he bullies Tucker verbally, tries to seduce his attractive wife, makes promises he knows he will not keep, provides false destinations where he is supposed to stay to shake him off, forbids him to ever come close to him again, and finally tells him that he is going to write his own biography. Yet none of these work and Tucker keeps pursuing him, jumping on him when and where he least expects it, begging and imploring him, willing to sacrifice anything, including his wife, academic career, and his last scraps of self-esteem and dignity to his dream project. Barclay fatally underestimates the fact that the more wicked and insidious his moves are the more desperate Tucker's counter-reactions become when he resolves to burn all his papers on a bonfire by the river so that Tucker can watch it from whichever place he is currently spying on him. The sadistic pleasure from the prospect of Tucker witnessing the turning of his dream into ashes provokes in Barclay feelings of utmost liberation, of "[f]reedom forsooth, freedom quotha" (Golding, 2013: 245), but only until he discovers that the instrument through which Tucker is peering at him from across the river is the viewfinder of a gun.

Although Palin's *The Truth* is similar in principle – a story with a surprising final twist about a biographer whose subject not only does not want his life to be written but also actively resists it – its ending's tone is far more positive, both with regard to the biographer-biographee relationship and to the merit of the genre as such. Keith Mabbut is offered the chance to write a biography of Hamish Melville, one of the world's most renowned and uncompromising environmentalists and human-right activists. This project represents an exciting challenge for Mabbut as Melville is an exceptionally elusive, solitary individual who spends his life travelling the world on his own in search of places of imminent ecological and/or humanitarian crisis where he is always ready to radically intervene to the benefit of the oppressed, exploited and endangered, but who avoids medialisation and anxiously protects his privacy. Mabbut, a once promising environmental journalist who, lured by the vision of money and career, "deserted" to the enemy camp to work for an oil company, finds himself at a crossroads as both his professional and personal lives have been far from satisfactory: he is discontented with his job which he sees as a shameful betrayal of his one-time ideals and his wife has left him for a richer man. Therefore, writing a biography of and potentially befriending the hero who personifies everything he ever dreamt of as a young man is for Mabbut an opportunity to fend off mid-life crisis and rediscover and restore his former, unblemished self.

Infused with youthful enthusiasm and idealism, Mabbut sets off on his quest for the truth, as the publisher's assignment demands, about the man whose life trajectory has been the reverse of his own – an ex-banker aiming to change the world by helping those in need. Undeterred by the arguments of the two women in his life, his wife Krystyna, who reminds him that the truth can be painful and not always what it seems, and his lover Tess, who questions the equation between facts and truthfulness and advises him to read good novels if he really wishes to find out the truth about human nature, Mabbut delves into the evidence about Melville's life only to soon discover that because of the absolute lack of intimate acquaintances, eye-witnesses and written documents to consult the research will be fruitless without the biographee's voluntary participation. This, however, turns out to be the crucial stumbling block as Melville is afraid that the biography would not only threaten his future actions but would also reduce him to a simplified caricature of himself – labelled, quantifiable, accessible – and shows no interest in supplying data “for the file marked ‘Hamish Melville, Living Legend’” (Palin, 2013: 159). Moreover, as he suspects Mabbut of being a spy he allows him to take part in his forthcoming mission only in order to check him out rather than to provide him with any biographical material.

It is only when Melville realises that Mabbut is sincere that he decides to tell him the naked truth about his own corruption and hunger for power and influence, due to which he ended up working as a double-agent so as to gain money for his projects. The irony is that it was Mabbut's idealism that eventually forced Melville to reconsider his life and reminded him of the pristine person he once was. Although Mabbut feels disappointed and betrayed and his intended hagiography is wrecked, he still writes the biography in the end as Melville asks him to reveal his true life story to the public as a cautionary tale showing that “[e]veryone, however admirable they appear to be, is simply human. Prone to all the imperfections, temptations and mendacities that go with the territory” (Palin, 2013: 280). And so, in spite of the misconceptions, self-deceptions, and disillusionments that the biographic enterprise entails for all the involved parties, the novel in fact ends happily as both the protagonists get what they long for: Melville, with the help of plastic surgery, his new identity while his old one “dies” in a faked car accident, and Mabbut his truthful biography.

In Kingsley Amis's *The Biographer's Moustache* a struggling writer, Gordon Scott-Thompson, is commissioned to write a biography of Jimmie Fane, an elderly novelist whose books he respects and thinks deserve positive critical appraisal. The problem is that Fane as a person is an unashamed snob who, though in his self-conceitedness welcomes the project, only barely conceals his indignation at the fact that his biography is to be completed by a plebeian hack. However, as it is his only chance of having

his biography written, Fane eventually gives consent to it and condescendingly allows the delighted Gordon to bring his semi-forgotten work back into the public eye. Yet Gordon's idealistic enthusiasm soon wears thin when faced with the bitter and pragmatic reality of biography writing. First, his publisher reminds him that, unlike Gordon, readers will be much more interested in Fane's personal life than in his writings and urges him to come up with "a couple of meaty excerptible chunks" (Amis, 1996: 220) while maintaining a moral tone throughout. Second, Fane's wife Joanna warns him that her husband enjoys publicity as long as he is in absolute control of it, which soon proves correct when Fane refuses to authorise anything that could potentially violate his carefully fostered public image. Having two different if not contradictory versions and knowing that the truth lies in its unattainability "somewhere in the middle" (Amis, 1996: 124), Gordon ends up merely with the solid factual material suitable for "the opening of an 800-page study" (Amis, 1996: 69), but too dry and heavy for the kind of book he has been intending to write.

Censorship interventions are not the only acts of Fane that frustrate Gordon as the elderly peacock revels in patronising and bullying him for his lower-class status, epitomised by his sporting of a moustache and his improper pronunciation. Yet while Gordon's progress as a biographer is slow and erratic, his personal progress is brisk and straightforward, thanks to his love affair with Joanna, though even in this case he could not be wholly certain that it was not somehow orchestrated by Fane. His success with Fane's wife gives him the confidence to not only confront his biographee's whims and insults, but also to defy his authority over the biography's content. However, although Gordon writes the warts-and-all version "[b]lowing the gaff on that toffy-nosed old twit" (Amis, 1996: 220), the novel has no clear-cut winners and losers. Fane has his dirty secrets exposed in Gordon's book but is grateful to him as he believes negative publicity will only arouse readers' interest in himself and his writing. Gordon, on the one hand, has his saleable book published and has learnt a valuable lesson about himself and his self-worth, but, on the other hand, the book's final version is completely unlike what he originally planned and his relationship with Joanna breaks up due to age and class differences. What the novel depicts almost to the limits is the process of disillusionment in a biographer with an uncritically admiring attitude to the subject after meeting him/her in person and undertaking a probe into the particularities of his/her private life.

A similar process forms the axis of Kureishi's *The Last Word*. Harry Johnson is a young writer who feels immensely elated and honoured when he is commissioned to write a biography of Mamoon Azam, the eminent, Indian-born novelist, essayist and journalist who has made a career in England and whom Harry has admired since he was a teenage bookworm.

He considers himself highly honoured to be able to present the reading public with the life story and personality of this great man and artist in their wholeness and complexity, yet the other parties' motivation behind the project is far more pragmatic and earthbound: Mamoon has not written anything notable for many years, his reputation has been steadily fading, as have the sales of his books, and his new wife, Liana, in order to satisfy her expensive and extravagant tastes, urgently needs to revive her husband's career; and the publisher, in order to make the biography an event on the book market, requires a controversial biography that would expose the revered man's dark side. However, Harry is soon to discover that the true obstacle to be overcome is neither Liana nor the publisher but Mamoon himself. In his early seventies and growing moody and irritable, he prefers the peace and quiet of his home to publicity, moreover, the whole project evokes in him the feeling that everything productive is already behind him and his current existence is good only for memoirs. And so, although deep inside he rationally understands the importance of the book for his future life, on the outside he shows no signs of helpfulness or desire to cooperate with Harry whom he considers an intruder.

Harry thus soon comes to understand that his intended working method of conducting "detailed and serious interviews" (Kureishi, 2015: 29) will not work as Mamoon's senile behaviour is strikingly at odds with the bright and piercing ideas of his writings. After he temporarily moves into the Azams' house so as to be closer to his subject, the biographer-biographee relationship starts to resemble a game of cat and mouse, or of even wait-and-see war tactics, and includes intimidation, deception, pretence, sulking, rampaging, blackmail, and even assault. Moreover, he finds himself exposed to pressure from Liana who tries to manipulate him to write her husband's hagiography. Since Mamoon is interested only in tabloid gossip and sports news and shows no willingness to talk about his life, Harry ends up with little more than general biographical data, Liana's version and the testimonies of Mamoon's former wives. It is only when Harry's girlfriend Alice arrives in the house for a weekend stay that he realises that young, attractive and attentive women are the key to the soul of this "worldly man with childish fears" (Kureishi, 2015: 50). Mamoon quickly develops a fondness for Alice who cares for him and listens to him sincerely without being demanding and he confides to her everything he has ever refused to tell Harry. And so the duel over who will have the last word culminates: while Harry is completing his wished-for book about an influential artist and thinker "without traducing the old man" (Kureishi, 2015: 343), the biographee is wreaking his vengeance by writing a semi-autobiographical novel about an elderly man's platonic yet genuine relationship with a young woman who becomes something like his muse, while her boyfriend, a

pitiable character known as “Fizzy Pants”, remains unaware and egotistically keeps on pursuing his love affairs.

### **Conclusion – Failing Questers (Not Only) in the Archive**

Biographic metafiction bears a certain affinity with the genre for which Suzanne Keen uses the term “romances of the archive”. These works show their main protagonists, at least for some time, as archival researchers, either scholarly or amateur, that is persons who are trying to discover the past, which is why they become “questers in the archive” who search for “information in collections of documents” (Keen, 2001: 3). Although the genre has become popular in the last few decades, it consistently treads in the old-fashioned narrative tradition and against the grain of postmodernist revisions of the notions of truth and history as unequivocal and available in their fullness as its archival seekers eventually do “find solid facts, incontrovertible evidence, and well-preserved memories of time past”, by which it insists that “there is a truth and that it can be found in a library or a hidden cache of documents” (Keen, 2001: 3, 27). Although some of the romances of the archive, for instance A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), make use of postmodernist techniques such as metafiction, intertextuality and pastiche, they are examples of the traditional model of representation in the sense that the attained written documents unproblematically correspond with historical reality, which is why the protagonists’ searches always lead to the discovery of order, truth, and therefore happiness (Nagy, 2016: 133). The term “romance” is important here because it not only reflects the fact that the novel’s characters experience some kind of love affair in the course of their research, but Keen (2001) also finds in the genre an echo of chivalrous tales in which the protagonists are attributed an aureole of heroism: they suffer as they are forced to undergo various adventures but come out of their quest rewarded not only with what they sought, but also with “an improved character – tested, rebuked, and strengthened” (11).

Biographic metafiction, like romances of the archive, owes much to the genre of detective fiction and both feature characters in search of a historical truth, which allows them to experience an exciting combination of “detective work and intellectual adventure” (Keen, 2001: 14). However, their similarity ends there since while romances of the archive “restore history to its glamorous, consoling, and admonitory powers” (Keen, 2001: 61), biographic metafiction, on the contrary, presents it as elusive, equivocal and obscure. Thus, their protagonists’ quests, though seriously meant and full of idealism in the beginning, by no means parallel those of classical romance as they more often than not run into blind alleys, follow false leads, and become victims of their own delusions and misconceptions, as a result of which their effort looks far from heroic. This inevitably affects the stories’ endings: these

biographers do not find their “grail” in the form of a well-researched and representative narrative. They often give up the search altogether, and even if they do produce a biography eventually, it is either substantially different from what they intended to write originally or not so much a result of their own merit. An exception in this regard is *According to Mark*<sup>98</sup>, where the biography is successfully completed, though the fact that Mark Lamming’s enterprise ends happily is due to the lucky circumstances of finding a surviving witness rather than as the result of thorough archival research. Also, to speak of improved character resulting from their quests is somewhat problematic in the case of the biographers, unless we count as an improvement their realisation that any biographic attempt is, in principle, destined to go wrong, which provokes a resolution to find a different channel for releasing their creative energy in the future. Lastly, some biographic metafiction protagonists do have love affairs while working on their books, but these are only short-lived and remain unfulfilled, such as in *According to Mark*, *The Paper Men*, *The Biographer’s Moustache*, *The Last Word* and even in *The Biographer’s Tale* as having two concurrent intimate relationships with women ignorant of the other’s existence can barely be considered likely to be sustainable or long-lasting.

Therefore, the relation between romances of the archive and biographic metafiction proves to be ambiguous. Although they render similar situations and conflicts, they do so by distinct means as they are based on completely contradictory premises concerning the (im)possibility of accomplishing their protagonists’ tasks. As regards the success and “heroicity” of their efforts to uncover historical truth, scholars, amateur researchers and even layman observers are treated benevolently within the safe and well-delineated territory of a traditional narrative, while literary biographers are cast into the postmodern realm of shifting sands and indistinct borders, where they are not only doomed to fail, but also, as naïve innocents, to suffer a bitter collapse of their ideals and illusions. This fact points not so much to their authors’ affiliation to a certain literary critical and theoretical school, but to their complicated personal attitude to the institution of literary biography and its practitioners. As aptly worded by Philip Roth in the epigraph, most authors are internally split regarding literary biography, oscillating between attraction and repulsion, the desire to become a subject of biography and the fear of the result, well aware that one could hardly avoid the revelation of some inconvenient personal truths. This split is then projected into biographic metafiction novels: exploring life writing in novels

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98 Suzanne Keen (2001) lists Lively’s *According to Mark* as an exemplary romance of the archive, but I would see it rather as a representative of biographic metafiction for the reasons mentioned on the subsequent lines.

legitimises biography as a serious literary issue, but at the same time, it is presented as being too tricky and undefinable to be treated without a dose of critical scorn and mockery. The result is a highly readable and thought-provoking genre which, however, is fighting a losing battle as due to biography's steadily rising popularity biographic metafiction's chances of overshadowing, not to say outlasting, the object of its criticism are rather negligible.

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