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and Peter Ackroyd“

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1. INTRODUCTION

Biographies make up an interesting and integral part of our literary culture. The contemporary literary scene's interest in the lives of artists accounts for an increasing number of bio-fictions – fictions that focus strongly on biographical elements – on the literary market. Bio-fictions, bio-plays and bio-films are a very interesting and diverse field of literary study. These narratives use traditional biographical forms and 'enhance' them by applying modern or postmodern concepts. They show the fascinating possibilities of fact and fiction, and give us an idea of how our mind might conceive the world around us.

Biography tries to capture the essence of the life of a person and to highlight "individual traits and features and [preserve] them for posterity" (Edel 18). Biographies are manifestations of the human quest to capture life and its mysteries for future generations. In order to achieve this, the biographer's task is to "[fashion] a man or a woman out of the seemingly intractable materials of archives, diaries, documents, dreams, a glimpse, a series of memories" (Edel 20). Biographers have to search the vast materials a human life accumulates for what Edel (24) calls "the figure under the carpet". They have to decipher "the life-myth of a given mask" (Edel 25). Biographers have to read psychological signs, gather psychological evidence and approach their subject with the right questions. For example, 'what is the hidden personal myth of my subject'? Biography, according to Edel (30) has

to become more than a recital of facts, more than a description of an 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 live, the myth that tells us we have some being, some selfhood, some goal, something to strive for beyond the fulfilments of food or sex or creature comforts.

Postmodernism prefers uncertainty, ambiguity and fragmentation to totality (Middeke 1). It is this postmodern emphasis on the unreliability of biographical knowledge, the focus on uncertainties or blanks that appear within the

presentation of biographical facts that have made authors, playwrights and biographers aware of the potential of so-called 'biofictions' (Middeke 2).

Both fiction and biography are narrative genres that use narrative elements to encode the message in text which in turn will be decoded by the receiver, or rather the reader. In our case, the vehicle to bring the message across is either the fictionalised biography or biographical fiction. Bio-fictions 'play' with the inherent differences between fact and fiction. They show the deviations from the actual. Moreover, bio-fictions are self-reflexive since they reflect on their own creative process (Middeke 3). Although bio-fictions are used for the deconstruction and demystification of long-established values and beliefs, they also emphasize the zest for life, and the immense originality that underlies these fictions that challenge 'the authority' or 'the above'.

Historical figures who are featured in bio-fictions are to a great extent artists of one kind or another. One may consider the reason why artists are the subjects for so many books and plays of this kind: the voyeuristic element is certainly present in this kind of genre that seems to appeal to the inquisitive desires of human beings. Huber and Middeke (134) quote Thomas Moore who declares that humans are always eager "to see a great mind in its undress".

Novels like A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* can be identified as historiographic metafiction (according to Linda Hutcheon), as biofictions (see Middeke 2), or as fictional metabiographies (Nünning, *Fictional Metabiographies* 197). They resist neat categorisations because they blur genre distinctions and transgress the boundary between fact and fiction. These novels highlight that 'history', 'the past' and 'biography' are narrative forms that pretend to portray historical truth by using fictional devices (see de Groot 110-111). Moreover, they reflect Linda Hutcheon's statement that there is not just one truth, but there are 'other' truths which depend on the subjective perception of the narrator (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 109-110).

Possession, *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Chatterton* blur the boundaries between the past and the present: they set the past against the present by presenting two or more timelines so that the reader is able to compare 'historical events' to the contemporary interpretation of these events. They let the past interact with the present. As a result, we see the constructedness of historical representations, and notice 'contemporary' characters mirror their 'historic' counterparts, while (as in the case of *Chatterton*) the past (*Chatterton*) imitates its future (George Meredith).

Byatt's, Barnes' and Ackroyd's novels scrutinise the conventions of contemporary biography and the methods of the biographers. Like many, for instance, Victorian and modernist artist and writers before them, they look sceptically at (fictional) biographers and portray them as being stalkers who are obsessed with the past (see Lee, *Introduction* 99), and who would not even shy away from grave-robbery to gain access to their subject's literary legacy. This behaviour prompts questions like: What happens to the literary legacy of artists and writers after their death? Who is the rightful owner, the artists' relatives or the public? Do artists become the property of their fans? Has the biographer the right to all documents available? Who owns the facts of one's life?¹

These biofictions aim at showing us readers that historical representations like biographies are constructs that depend on the biographer's intellectual processes of selection, manipulation and interpretation of historical documents such as letters, diaries and manuscripts. The biographer employs biographical conventions – like time, place, character, events, chronology, teleological structure, documentary sources, and even moral judgements or personal opinions – “to give as full, intelligible, and accurate a version of the subject's life as possible” (Lee, *Introduction* 124).

Byatt, Barnes and Ackroyd expose in their novels that the 'authentic' representation of biographical subjects is 'fiction'. They blur the boundary between fact and fiction and use postmodern concepts like metafictionality,

¹ The question is adapted from Ted Hughes (Sylvia Plath's husband) who exclaimed, “I hope each one of us owns the facts of his or her own life.” (qtd. in Lee, *Body Parts* 29)

fragmentation, intertextuality, self-reflexivity and genre-blurring as means to illustrate the constructedness of the past. They point out that the depiction of the 'real', 'true' subject is impossible. Therefore, they shift the focus from the biographer's presentation of the biographee towards a representation of the biographer's quest to discover this 'holy grail' – the authentic past. Their novels reveal society's deeply ingrained longing for absoluteness and authenticity and biographers' narcissistic desire to 'possess' their subject.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2.1. On Biography

Biographies have greatly enriched the field of literature. Yet even Michael Holroyd states in the very first sentence of his article 'What Justifies Biography?' that biography "is still very young and not yet very popular, despite what people say" (*Justifies* 16). Often described as a strange mixture of history-writing and the 'traditional' novel, some critics see the genre as product of journalism (Holroyd, *Justifies* 16). Holroyd explains further that the fascination and justification of the art of biography lies in the magic of recreating the past. Deep within human nature we find the desire to keep death at bay by "[throwing] light upon the life"² (qtd. in Holroyd, *Justifies* 17).

In order to understand how the genre 'biography' works and what it does to its readers, we may look at its changes through time – in this instance especially at British literary biography. Different variants and manifestations of biography came into existence in the course of many centuries. It is possible to trace biography's evolution from early 'ur-biographies' and hagiographies that depict exemplary lives, to the intense and intimate realism that can be found in 18th-century portrayals, to Victorian 'Lives and Letters' that brim over with conservative sternness, to modernist aesthetic experiments in live-writing, and to its current 'Golden Age' of sincere, professional, post-Freudian biographies of the 20th and early 21st century (Lee, *Introduction* xiv). Hermione Lee, however, strikes this progressive model for biography as deceptive. She prefers a model of biography of "continual recurrence, in different contexts, of the same questions of definition, value and purpose" (Lee, *Introduction* xiv).

² W.H. Auden was of the opinion that biographies of writers were superfluous, in bad taste and did not throw light on the writer's work. But he also states, "I do believe, however, that, more often than people realize, the works [biographies] may throw light upon the life." (Holroyd, *Justifies* 17)

2.1.1. Definitions of Biography

To ascribe a single, neat definition to biography is hard to do. Often different terms, like Life-writing, Life-history, memoir, or profile, are used to denote what it is. We see comparisons to history, quests or journeys, detective work, obituaries, documentaries, gossip, scenes in a play, excavations, a fishing-net or a work of fiction (Lee, *Introduction* 1). Frequently metaphors are used to visualize the conglomeration of meanings that the term 'biography' implies.

One of the more disturbing but useful metaphors is the autopsy. When a person's death is unusual or suspicious a forensic examination of the body is made so that the cause of death might be determined. During the autopsy the forensic pathologist opens up the body, layer by layer. While doing this, he describes his findings, gathers evidence, and tries to find explanations for what may have seemed strange or obscure (Lee, *Introduction* 1-2). The image that the metaphor of the autopsy conjures up is that of "biography as a process of posthumous scrutiny, applied to a helpless subject" (Lee, *Introduction* 2). Depending on what the process brings to light, it is possible to change the posthumous view of the subject. Although the examination will not injure the dead, it might cause pain to the family and friends left behind. In addition, this metaphor of forensic examination also has its limitations, as the inner life of the subject – the thoughts, emotions, and beliefs – cannot be adequately addressed (Lee, *Introduction* 2). Moreover, the image of autopsy also emphasizes the more 'ghoulish' or predatory aspects of biography. Commentators who were wary of the genre thought that biography would be 'adding a new terror to death'. In order to thwart the 'post-mortem exploiter' or grave-robber – the biographer – Henry James, for example, ordered his nephew to burn a large number of his personal papers as his "sole wish" was to 'frustrate as utterly as possible the post-mortem exploiter'" (Lee, *Introduction* 2).

A different kind of metaphor is biography as portrait. While autopsy implies a clinical, posthumous scrutiny, and can be understood as violation, the portrait brings positive connotations to mind: it hints at liveliness, authenticity, empathy

and immortality. The portraitist tries to capture in his painting the character, energy and personality of his subject by paying attention to idiosyncrasies (see Lee, *Introduction* 2). In 1814 William Hazlitt comments that “portrait-painting is the biography of the pencil” (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 3). When we talk about portraits, the highest praise one can give is to state that “‘the very life seems warm upon her lip’, that it might be warm to the touch, ‘looking as if she were alive’” (Lee, *Introduction* 3). Consequently, the biographer’s subject should, like the person in the portrait, seem alive, warm, authentic, and emanate charisma and personality. Therefore, it is the biographer’s duty and mission to catch the subject’s ‘vital spark’ and, as Thomas Carlyle puts it in 1830, to capture the “‘light-gleams’ that make up a person’s character” (Lee, *Introduction* 3). However, there is also a downside to biography as portrait: idealization, flattery and inaccuracy can falsify our perception of the subject. Moreover, readers become aware that the representation is dependent on the biographer’s attitude, prejudices, methods and techniques (Lee, *Introduction* 3-4). Thus, a ‘portrait’ of the same subject by different ‘artists’ will result in different ‘images of the self’. Another aspect one has to consider is that a portrait presents one moment fixed in time, whereas the subject of a biography constantly changes, ages, and will eventually die³.

In order to define biography without using metaphors, analogies or comparisons, one might turn to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (42) which explains that biography is “a genre of historiography concerned with representing the lives of individual people.” The name of the genre – biography – contains already its basic meaning. Deriving from Greek *biographía* which means life (from Greek *bíos*) and to write (*gráphein*), it means life-writing, writing lives. The term ‘biography’ with its modern signification was first used by John Dryden in *Life of Plutarch* (1683) (*RENT* 42). Biography in its ‘essential’ form is considered a nonfictional form of literature (“biography” 60-61). Hermione Lee (*Introduction* 5) simplifies the definition to “[b]iography is the story of a person told by someone else.” Yet, Lee’s very basic definition is not without

³ Of course, this refers to biographees that are still alive and able to ‘pose’ for the biographer. A prominent number of biographies are written about subjects that have been dead for centuries. Here it is impossible for the biographer to base his biography on the ‘original’, but he has to focus on the ‘likeness’ in portraits painted by other artists.

fault: a biography could be a veiled autobiography, written under the pretence that the subject's partner was the author.⁴ Moreover, a biography can have more than one subject, presenting 'Group Lives'⁵, or be written by more than one biographer⁶, or tell the story of an animal⁷, city⁸ or thing.

Essentially, biographies combine the life stories of particular people with imagination provided by the biographer. Catherine Parke notes in her book *Biography: Writing Lives* that

this form rivals fiction in its imaginative appeal to the most powerful emotions of hope and fear, desire and hate, attraction and repulsion, as well as for the fact that in its long history biography has identified issues and tackled problems endemic to life [...]. (Parke xiii)

Biographies have a strong social quality. They address human curiosity about people, how a person relates to the time he or she is living in, and the way a person has influenced the thoughts and lives of others. In this light, it is interesting to consider life-writing in the binary terms of majority and minority biography. One can examine whether or not the subject or the author of the biography is part of the dominant culture, if the subject is a 'conventional' candidate for a biography, and in what ways majority and minority biographies are constructed differently (Parke xvii).

According to Catherine Parke (29-30), biographies can be divided into five main categories: (1) popular biographies that depict the life of current celebrities, (2) historical biographies that show the biographer's subject in its time context, (3) literary biographies which focus on artists, their life and/or work. This third category has a sub-category, namely the critical biography which looks critically at the work of the artist. As category (4) one can identify reference biographies. These are collective biographies that focus in their brief entries on personalities of great interest. Category (5) can be identified as fictional biographies that take

⁴ Thomas Hardy pretended that his wife had written his biography; and Gertrude Stein wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, giving the impression that her partner, Alice B. Toklas, had written the biography (see Lee, *Introduction* 6).

⁵ More recent examples are Jenny Uglow's *The Lunar Men*, or Megan Marshall's *The Peabody Sisters*.

⁶ *Life of D. H. Lawrence* published in three volumes by the Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Virginia Woolf's *Flush*.

⁸ Peter Ackroyd's *London: The Biography*.

up facts about people and events and develop them by using narrative techniques usually applied for fictions. The author relies on secondary sources and treats his subject like a novelist would treat a character in his or her novel.

2.1.2. Biography – A Short Survey

Within the long and varied – never linear – history of biography one can find many influential and noteworthy instances of biography. So, for example, the biographies compiled by the Chinese Grand Historian Szuma Chien (1st century B.C.E.) who introduced to his highly realistic historical writing vernacular language, anecdotes and concluded his entries with interpretative summaries that contained a moral message (Parke 2). Closer to Europe, in Greece, Xenophon and Plato wrote quite different biographies on Socrates. Both had known the philosopher personally. While Xenophon focused on the subject's work in relation to his life, Plato devised a "coherent, dramatic portrait of Socrates the thinker" (Parke 3) by using his notes to Socrates' lectures. Although Xenophon and Plato wrote about the same subject, their approaches to biography were different resulting in works that shed light on the personality of Socrates from two possible perspectives.

Greek and Roman literature knew two rhetorical forms of address which proved extremely important for the development of biography: the 'encomium' – the praise of the dead – and the 'panegyric' which praised the living (Lee, *Introduction* 22). Moreover, there are two main trends within life-writing that can be traced back to Hellenistic and Roman biographies:

(1) individual lives developing out of the rhetorical techniques of praise and criticism, [...]; and (2) collective biographies of philosophers, painters, musicians [...], developing out of the Peripatetic's encyclopedic interest in knowledge and technical skill." (Parke 10)

Plutarch's legacy can be found even in contemporary biographies. He is best known for writing biography with a moral purpose. In *Life of Pericles* he declared, "[A]ctions arising out of virtue...immediately put one in a frame of mind such that one simultaneously admires the acts and desires to emulate the agents" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 23). Although he emphasized the moral

message, he also made us familiar with classical antiquity by recounting “the life of the household and shop and market, the anecdotes, the superstitions, the customs and rites” (Thayer 261). Plutarch took great pains to develop the personality of his ‘great men’, and “showed that character could be shaped and changed through accidents, catastrophes, and successes” (Lee, *Introduction* 23). Moreover, Plutarch was of the opinion that one needs to gather accurate facts for writing biographies. At the same time the biographer has to be aware that history and biography are two different concepts (Parke 15). He said,

I am not writing history but biography, and the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or the badness of the agent; often, in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives...Just as a painter reproduces his subject's likeness by concentrating on the face and the expression of the eyes...I must be allowed to devote more time to those aspects which indicate a person's mind....while leaving their major exploits and battles to others. (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 24)

Modern biography's belief that the interpretation of the subject's character and personality, together with actual facts, form the cornerstones of a 'life' goes back to Plutarch. Between the 15th and 17th centuries, Plutarch was translated into Latin, then French, and finally English. Thomas North's translation of 1579 was used by Shakespeare⁹, and Dryden devised a new translation in 1683. In the preface to his translation Dryden explained that Plutarch was not merely a moralist, but an author of character. He saw Plutarch's greatest achievement in having 'humanized' his 'great men':

Here you are led into the private lodgings of the hero: you see him in his undress, and are made familiar with his most private actions and conversations [...] you see the poor reasonable animal, as naked as nature ever made him; are made acquainted with his passions and his follies, and find the Demi-God a man. (qtd. In Lee, *Introduction* 24)

From the eighteenth century to the present time biography shows the high complexity and the influence of modern Western consciousness and culture. Important for the development of the genre were notions like the post-Renaissance differentiation between private and public self and the 'invention'

⁹ William Shakespeare's Roman plays (see Lee, *Introduction* 24).

of the individual identity which seventeenth century writers as the “heros [sic] of modern print culture and expanding literacy” (Parke xvii) set in motion.

The 18th century saw Dr Samuel Johnson¹⁰ and James Boswell¹¹ as primary representatives of biography. According to Michael Holroyd (*Justifies* 16), it was Dr Johnson and his *Lives of the Poets* that “removed biography from [the shadow of history] and established it as an independent branch of literature.” It was also due to Johnson that “[a]ny life [...] might be worth a biography” (Rollyson 363) as Johnson was fascinated by human nature (see Holroyd, *Justifies* 16). The two biographers, Johnson and Boswell, both influenced later biographers although (or because) their approaches to ‘writing lives’ differed. While Johnson advocated a biography that used facts which had ‘run through the biographer’s mind’, Boswell presented a collection of primary documents that were loosely connected by a minimal narrative (Parke 17).

The mid-nineteenth century saw complexities of form, issues of evidence and criteria for selection of important facts come to the front. Moreover, biography reflected what Holroyd (*Justifies* 16) called “the blight of Victorianism”. This ‘blight’ affected people’s outlook on society, intellectual thinking, religion and sexuality. As a consequence, the genre’s focus shifted from the private sphere to the public life. As Holroyd (*Justifies* 16) put it, “Private life was hidden under a prim camouflage.” Virginia Woolf parodied the conservative Victorian biography that clung to respectability and irrelevance in her fantasy-biography *Orlando*, and Carlyle exclaimed, “How delicate, decent is English biography, bless its mealy mouth!” (qtd. in Holroyd, *Justifies* 16)

The form of life-writing has always been greatly influenced by the then-current cultural context. Over time, writings by famous thinkers like Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung¹² and Erik Erikson¹³ have had a great impact on critical thoughts about biography-writing and biography-reception. The twentieth century in turn was preoccupied with the relation between fact

¹⁰ 1709-1784.

¹¹ 1740-1795.

¹² Carl Jung proclaimed the idea of universal archetypes.

¹³ Erikson “proposed a developmental model of identity that focuses on key moments of ego formation in relation to historical context as well as personal circumstances.” (Parke 25)

and fiction, art and fact and truth and imagination. The ideal saw that the biographer used novelist's tools like arrangement, suggestion and dramatic effect while always adhering to the accuracy of fact (Parke 28).

2.1.3. Modernist Stance Towards Biography

The way modernist writers thought and wrote (about) auto/biography was revolutionary, thought-provoking and highly influential for our contemporary perception of the genre. Postmodern writers not only incorporate features which can be found in modernist life-writing but evolve and continue to evolve them even further. Applying the term 'biography' to modernist explorations of 'life' seems too narrow. As a consequence, Hermione Lee (*Introduction* 73) proposes the term 'life-writing' as more fitting for "this mixture of auto/biographical memoirs, satiric sketches, fictionalized or psychoanalytical quests, and investigations of how life-stories can be written." Fictional tactics like irony, parody and caricature, as well as other fictional devices were used at the beginning of the 20th century to differentiate biography from the 'monstrosity' that biography had become during the Victorian period. The relationship between biographer and his subject had changed, too. If the Victorian biographer was awe-struck, respectful and putting himself in the position of the disciple, the attitude of the modernist biographer was different: very often he would take the role of an equal to his subject. Additionally, biographers had become self-conscious and would frequently turn biography into a form of autobiography (Lee, *Introduction* 73). Modernist biographies are said to be frank, experimental and psychoanalytical and use irony, playfulness and style to uncover the real, inner self behind the mask of the public figure (Lee, *Introduction* 72-73).

These characteristics that define 'the new biography' – as Virginia Woolf termed it – appear in biographical works over a period of approximately forty years. One can find them in writings from the late 1890s up to the 1930s and 1940s (Lee, *Introduction* 73). An important member of the movement is Edmund Gosse who wrote various essays on biography and "a study of two temperaments" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 75) called *Father and Son* (1907). It

was a very moving memoir of his unusual childhood, describing his upbringing by a father who was caught between scientific inquisitiveness and fundamentalist Calvinist beliefs. Gosse's work was an innovative genre, as it was neither a biography of his parents, nor an autobiography per se. He exposed a private family life with more outspokenness than contemporary readers were accustomed to. As a consequence, Edmund Gosse was praised for its openness on the one hand, on the other hand he was blamed for "going too far" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 75). His striking and compassionate portrait of a father-son relationship influenced later writers' memoirs such as Philip Roth's *Patrimony* or Blake Morrison's *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (Lee, *Introduction* 75).

Among the authors deemed most influential for the movement is Lytton Strachey – himself an interesting subject for biographies – who received much praise for his highly acclaimed four short Lives of *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and was also noted for his slightly less momentous *Queen Victoria* (1921) and *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928). He was part of the Cambridge and Bloomsbury circle and wrote history, criticism and 'portraits' throughout his life. *Eminent Victorians* was written between 1912 and 1918 and demystified four great public figures: the headmaster of a renowned public school, Dr Arnold, the Great War's nurse-heroine, Florence Nightingale, an ambitious priest who crossed from the Church of England to Rome, Cardinal Manning, and one of Britain's most disastrous military leaders, General Gordon (Lee, *Introduction* 76). In the preface to this book Strachey declares to discard and expose "'Victorian' heaviness, solemnity and respect by light, ironic, irreverent methods" (Lee, *Introduction* 76). Readers at the time were shocked: they were familiar with public persons' biographies like Dean Stanley's *Life of Dr Arnold* or the glorification of Florence Nightingale as 'The Lady with the Lamp' (Lee, *Introduction* 77). As Hermione Lee (*Introduction* 76) explains, Strachey wanted to unmask these public paragons, re-imagine their public activities as sublimations of private traumas and repression, and show them as representatives of an age whose 'children' were responsible for the Great War. He achieved his goals through tone and structure and unconventional angles of approach. Later critics accused the work of being inaccurate, dandyish and

'thin' (see Lee, *Introduction* 77). Yet it is important to remember that although Strachey ridiculed the pompousness of the late Victorian era, he still preserved forms of traditional history and biography in his work (Gilbert xxv).

Harold Nicolson is another famous name associated with the 'new biography'. He had distinguished himself with his unusual portraits, *Some People* (1927), and *The Development of English Biography* (1928). He favoured a short, artful and playful biographical style and believed that two contrary systems of biography were set against each other: on the one hand there was the traditional, Victorian, hagiographical – 'impure' – form of biography, on the other hand was the honest, modern, well constructed – 'pure' – form of biography. Moreover, Nicolson thought biography would split into two different modes: a 'scientific' biography that would focus on sociological and psychoanalytical analysis, while 'literary' biography would be imaginative and crafted. In biographical criticism and theorizing of the past and present one can frequently find arguments for a dichotomy between right/wrong, old/new, 'pure'/'impure', 'scientific'/'literary', but it should be noted that the genre itself always defies such neat categorizations (Lee, *Introduction* 78-79).

Other critics, biographers and writers whose ideas influenced the modernist biography were – among others – the French writer Marcel Schwob, who had – even before Gosse and Strachey – supported the idea that the lives of obscure or eccentric characters were the most intriguing and that portraying their habits, mannerism and physical traits had more impact than reciting large historical events; the French critic and biographer André Maurois who had in 1928 in his Clark lectures argued for an equal artistic status for biography with the other arts (Lee, *Introduction* 78-79); and Arthur Symonds presented an experimental biography in *The Quest for Corvo* (1934). His biography of Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo, an eccentric and author of *Hadrian the Seventh*, is depicted as a quest for his elusive subject and can be analysed as part contemplation on biography, part detective story and part spiritual journey. *The Quest for Corvo* is a conglomeration of artful symbolist prose, obscure learning and strange encounters that make the reader question the existence of Baron Corvo or even

his biographer (Lee, *Introduction* 82). It has all the features of a 'postmodern' examination of biography and the biographer's quest.

While writers as those mentioned before were interested in aestheticism and its artful, sculpturing and impressionistic effects on biography, the majority of biographers were not engaging in formal experiments. Yet at the beginning of the twentieth century professional biographers, historians and experimental writers were equally absorbing the doctrines of Freudian psychoanalysis (Lee, *Introduction* 83). In the 1890s Freud had started to publish his theories on hysteria and psychology. From the 1920s onwards English translations of his texts (translated by Lytton Strachey's brother and sister-in-law) were published by the Woolf's Hogarth Press. Freud showcased his approach to psychoanalysis and his findings by narrating case-histories (e.g. Dora, Little Hans, the Wolf Man, etc.) which could be compared to short life-sketches. These case-histories had a lasting influence on the methods of compiling biographies: the proceedings involved following clues, finding patterns of behaviour, paying attention to details through which the personality of the subject could be grasped, finding childhood-traumata which influenced adult behaviour and deciding which facts were useful (Lee, *Introduction* 84).

Although Freud saw these methods' similarity to archaeological excavations (a metaphor which is in most cases positively understood), he was extremely disapproving of biography and remarked in 1936 in a letter, "[a]nyone who writes biography is committed to lies, concealments, hypocrisy, flattery and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth does not exist, and if it did we could not use it" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 84). According to Adam Phillips, Freud's aversion to biography can be interpreted in three ways: (1) as Freud's own perceived rivalry between psychoanalysis and biography; (2) as his misgivings about psychoanalysis itself; and (3) as warning of the dangers if biography acted as if the totality of a person could be captured on paper (see Lee, *Introduction* 84). Nevertheless, in 1910 Freud published his own 'psycho-biography', *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of Childhood*, in which he explained da Vinci's genius and 'thirst for knowledge' as a result of his repressed sexuality (Lee, *Introduction* 86).

Due to Freud's theories, biographers 'post-Freud' took on the challenge to scrutinize their subjects' infancy, dreams, illnesses and sexuality (Lee, *Introduction* 86). As Freud himself noted, "If a biographical study really seeks to arrive at an understanding of the mental life of its hero, it must not - as most biographies do, out of discretion or prudery - keep silent about his sexual activity and sexual individuality" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 86).

From the 1920s to the 1960s, and even later, psycho-biography was an extremely popular genre. Psycho-biography had artists, writers, composers, politicians and scientists put on the couch and their behaviour fitted into a pattern. However, the number of voices speaking up against this form of biography was rising. In 1933, the American writer Bernard De Voto complained, "Psychoanalytical biography ... does not tell us what did happen. It tells us instead what must have happened" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 88). In the 1950s Leon Edel defended psycho-biography by declaring its value, for it showed "how the negatives were converted into positives" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 88), and how "the subject could overcome a 'wound' and turn it into art" (Lee, *Introduction* 88). Richard Ellmann added that this form of biography had its uses if "it is the biographer manipulating psychological theory, not allowing psychological theory to manipulate him" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 88).

Analysing biographies of great literary figures, such as Sartre's *L'Idiot de la Famille*, Leon Edel's *Life of Henry James* (1953-77) or George Painter's *Marcel Proust*, they now seem to be steeped in psychoanalytical theories. But sometimes writers also incorporated their subject's mixed feelings about psychoanalysis into the structure of the biography itself, as happened in Richard Ellmann's *Joyce* (Lee, *Introduction* 88-90). Although contemporary theorists do agree that psycho-biography's clinical approach had misconstruing effects, one has to remember that biography and psychoanalysis have different goals to achieve. Today, we recognize these texts themselves as historical documents that present one interpretation about the writer's life at one particular moment in time (Lee, *Introduction* 90).

After having established the continuing influence of Freud's theories and case-histories on the development of biography in the twentieth century, we turn now to a modernist writer who was certainly familiar with Freud's texts as they were published in her and her husband's own publishing house, the Hogarth Press. Virginia Woolf's outlook on the nature and limitations of biography had a lasting impact on the way life-writing is discussed even today (Monk 1). Looking at Woolf's writings, one notices the predominance of all forms of life-writing in her life, work and legacy. She kept a diary, penned an innumerable amount of letters, published various noteworthy essays on the art of biography, but also wrote fictional biographies, such as her highly acclaimed *Orlando* (1928), her less known *Flush* (1933), and her only 'real' biography, Roger Fry (1940), or worked on her unfinished memoir 'Sketch of the Past' (1939-41) (Lee, *Introduction* 73).

It appears reasonable to identify her father's – Sir Leslie Stephen's – occupation as first editor of the renowned *Dictionary of National Biography* as a cornerstone of her interest in the genre. She could witness firsthand the "personal but often 'official' genre of biography and its relationship to 'official' public historiography" (Gilbert xxi). As Gilbert (xxi) points out, through studying historical and biographical classics like Macaulay's *History of England*, Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Thomas Arnold's *History of Rome* and Froude's *Life of Carlyle*, she became aware that history and biography focused on the lives and deeds of 'great' men. This may have triggered her wish to author feminist treatises such as *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938)¹⁴, but also her aspiration to rewrite official history and focus on 'the lives of the obscure'¹⁵ – women – who make up 'the other history' that "'breaks the sequence' of recorded time" (Gilbert xxii). Nonetheless, in her diary she keeps writing biographical sketches of famous men like Eliot, Yeats, Thomas Hardy and H.G. Wells. Yet those sketches are very biased, irreverent and personal (Lee, *VW* 8). She questions the traditional concept of life-writing, is preoccupied with challenging the boundaries between history, biography, memoirs, letters, journals and fiction (Lee, *VW* 8 &13).

¹⁴ Both essays, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, are not only feminist treatise but can also be read as essays on life-writing (see Lee, *VW* 15).

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'The Lives of the Obscure' (1925).

From a young age onward, Virginia Woolf had delighted in writing mock histories of people close to her. One of those earliest biographical experiments was collected in a work called *Friendship's Gallery* (1907), which was the playful and comical depiction of her close friend Violet Dickinson to whom she was deeply attached (Gilbert xv). Woolf called herself Violet's "Bio- or mythographer" (qtd. in Lee, VW 13). The work can be classified as a "spoof love-letter-cum-biography, an early *Orlando*"¹⁶ (Lee, VW 13). Its purpose was to make fun of what you do as a biographer when writing about the life of a woman (Lee, VW 14). The following year – in 1908 – she wrote a 'memoir' of her sister Vanessa Bell called 'Reminiscences'. It takes the form of a letter and addresses her sister's firstborn son. In this manner it imitates the "nineteenth-century patriarchal tradition of the autobiography written as a letter to one's children" (Lee, VW 18). Virginia Woolf's grandfather and father had both left their children such a narrative. The 'Mausoleum Book' – as her father's memoir of his dead wife was labelled by the Stephen children – provided the male view of the family, while 'Reminiscences' tried to capture the story of the Stephen women in a formal and unsentimental manner (Lee, VW 18-19).

Moreover, *Friendship's Gallery* is closely linked to her work 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn' (1906), in which the middle-aged female historian Rosamund Merridew discovers among the patriarchal archives of a Norfolk farmer's family the fifteenth-century journal of a country girl named Joan Martyn. Here, patriarchal archives are set against female documents, official history against an 'obscure' one, and archival research against imaginative research (Lee, VW 14). Joan Martyn can also be considered the prototype for the mythical 'Judith Shakespeare' who would come into existence in the essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) (Gilbert xxii). This feminist treatise culminates in the "fascinating and masterly biography" (qtd. in Lee, VW 15) of Shakespeare's imaginary sister, and although she is a genius like her brother, she is prevented from living a self-fulfilled and artistic life because of her gender. According to Hermione Lee (VW 15), *A Room of One's Own* is "historical and Utopian, a

¹⁶ It was Nigel Nicolson who described *Orlando* as the "most elaborate love-letter" (Woolf, *Letters III* xxii).

tragic description of what women's lives have been like and an empowering fantasy of how they might become different."

In *Three Guineas*, the Victorian biography is read like a cryptic text where one story hides beneath another. From the text one is able to decode male attitudes towards women, their struggle for education and occupation, their view on war. Moreover, the essay also provides meaningful jokes about the genre "(we need a female biography of God, she [Woolf] says, since it looks as if a male biography of the Deity 'would resolve itself into a Dictionary of Clerical Biography')" (Lee, VW 15).

Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries found themselves being part of a revolutionary process which would turn biography from the traditional, 'rich and revealing' genre into the "iconoclastic, gossipy art-form it is now"¹⁷ (Lee, VW 12). Virginia Woolf had written two now very famous and influential essays on the art of biography: 'The New Biography' (1927) and 'The Art of Biography' (1939). 'The New Biography' is a review of Harold Nicolson's *Some People* (1927) which Woolf combined with an evaluation of modern biography. She starts her essay by quoting Sir Sidney Lee who says, "The aim of biography is the truthful transmission of personality" (qtd. in Woolf, *TNB* 473). According to her, this sentence encapsulates the essential problem that modern biography faces: the split into truth and personality¹⁸. She continues by providing one of the most often quoted, imaginative metaphors that stand for these concepts: truth is imagined as "granite-like solidity" that symbolizes the "hard facts" come by "the weight of research" (*TNB* 473), while personality is seen as the "rainbow-like intangibility" of the inner life of a human character (*TNB* 473) which "can only be captured by an imaginative leap" (Gualtieri 349). The aim of biography is to bring those two opposing concepts – 'granite and rainbow', 'truth and personality', 'factual accuracy and fictional invention' – seamlessly together without denying the characteristics of either concept (see Gualtieri, footnote 1).

¹⁷ It would be a mistake to limit contemporary biography to its "gossipy" representatives. Today's literary market caters to all kinds of tastes and provides many different forms of biography – from the 'rich and revealing', many volume long biographies to the literary and the "gossipy" biographies. This 'broadness' is one of the genre's attractions.

¹⁸ Sir Sidney Lee saw truth and personality not as two opposing modes. Therefore, Woolf's split can be understood as a critique of Lee's definition, but also shows the modern understanding of the genre (see Gualtieri 351).

In 'The New Biography' Woolf reviews Lee's own attempts at biography as failed ones because he did not choose to use those facts that transmit personality: "[f]or in order that the light of personality may shine through, those facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded: yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity" (TNB 473). In this sense, Lee's practice of biography can be understood as being part of a continued tradition which was "draping the robes decorously over the recumbent figures of the dead" (TNB 474). This 'stiffness' of form was undone by James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791). Boswell was able to "recreate a sense of Johnson's intimate presence" (Gualtieri 351) which makes the readers feel as if "[w]e may sit, even with the great and good, over the table and talk" (TNB 474). Woolf was of the opinion that Boswell had achieved what modern biographers attempted: to combine factual accuracy with imaginative recreation (Gualtieri 352).

Like Boswell had to overcome the tradition of the chronicler, in a similar manner modern biography had to do away with Victorian biographies which were "laden with truth", "action [took] shape in innumerable words" (TNB 475) and "the idea of goodness" (TNB 474) dominated the narrative. In her essay Woolf explains that the 'new school' and Nicolson's *Some People* differentiate themselves from the 'old school' via a "lack of pose, humbug, solemnity" (TNB 476). Moreover, she identifies the 'new' features: the size of the text is diminished; the point of view altered and the author (or biographer) is put in the position of an equal who has the freedom to judge his subject. Woolf declares that the biographer's art is to choose and synthesise (TNB 475): maintaining "the man himself, the pith and essence of his character [...] shows itself to the observant eye in the tone of a voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote picked up in passage" (TNB 476). Besides, Nicolson merges fact and fiction. *Some People* presents nine character sketches, and of those nine, only one story is entirely nonfictional. Later Harold Nicolson told his son that he wanted "to put real people in imaginary situations, and imaginary people in real situations" (qtd. in Monk 3). Woolf notes that by the end of the narrative the reader has a better picture of the author – Nicolson – than of any other character presented (TNB 477). Following this vein of thought, Ray Monk cites Nigel Nicolson who argues

that the central theme of *Some People* is his father's emotional and intellectual development, and each stage of this process is personified by one of the characters presented (Monk 3).

Paradoxically, it seems to be this exact merging of the substance and reality of truth with the artistic freedom of fiction which leaves Woolf uneasy and discontent with the realisation of the 'new biography'. She agrees that "one can use many devices of fiction in dealing with real life [and] a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively" (*TNB* 477), but declares next that although both truths – the 'truth of fact' and 'the truth of fiction' – are genuine, they are antagonistic and destroy each other (*TNB* 477). Woolf claims that,

Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible; yet [the biographer] is now more than ever urged to combine them. For it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act. Each of us is more Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, than he is John Smith, of the Corn Exchange. Thus, the biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life. Yet if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact. (*TNB* 478)

Yet, at the beginning of the essay Woolf had declared that the new school of biography had to combine factual accuracy and fictional invention. Now she seems anxious about one concept contaminating the other and the lack of firm boundaries compromising the reader's pact with the biographer (see Gualtieri 352). According to Woolf, Boswell is *the* 'truthful' biographer, but this truth is based on his rhetorical ability and not on the veracity of facts outside the text. It is the reader's absolute belief in Boswell's truthfulness which brings out the imaginative power of the work. The consequence is, as Elena Gualtieri (353) points out, that Woolf undermines the concept that 'truth of fiction' is being dependent on 'truth of fact'. If the 'truth of fact' becomes the result of textual strategies, then this would imply that "the nature of its opposition to the 'truth of fiction' becomes itself the product of a rhetorical gesture" (Gualtieri 353).

Ray Monk explains Woolf's inherent inconsistency with her own views on biography, fiction and the experience of 'life'. He uses her essays 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', the short story 'The Mark on the Wall', and her novel *Jacob's Room* to illustrate Woolf's belief that *real* life is *internal*, while facts are part of the external, outside world (Monk 6). He summarizes Woolf's view on reality: "in order to represent life as it really is, in order to present people as they really are, we must conjure up phantoms; in order to capture the truth about reality, we must write fiction" (Monk 12).

Had Woolf's assessment of the 'new biography' had an overall positive outlook, seeing a 'possible direction' for the genre, so much more melancholic and pessimistic does her essay 'The Art of Biography' (1939) appear to be. Disillusioned she starts, "The art of biography, we say – but at once go on to ask, Is biography an art?" (TAB 119). She continues by lamenting the fact that the multitude of biographies written will be forgotten over time; fiction by Chaucer or Henry James on the other hand will last for centuries to come (TAB 120). Woolf explains that the reason for the "lack of [biographical] masterpieces" (TAB 120) lies with the genre itself and states, "[T]he art of biography is the most restricted of all arts. [...] The novelist is free; the biographer is tied" (TAB 120). She clarifies that the biographer has to adhere to facts which can be accessed with the help of the widow or friends, while the novelist is free from outside influences and has only to obey those restrictions that he himself chooses (TAB 120).

Virginia Woolf uses her reviews of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, and *Elizabeth and Essex* to analyse Strachey's biographical practice and to assess the repercussions of that practice for the future development of the genre (Gualtieri 355). She considers *Victoria* a "triumphant success" (TAB 122) because "[Strachey] used to the full the biographer's power of selection and relation, but he kept strictly within the world of fact" (TAB 122). On the other hand, she regards *Elizabeth* as "a failure" (TAB 122) due to the fact that Strachey had "to invent" in order to supplement the "very little [that] was known" (TAB 123). She bases her assessment of these biographies on the way Strachey interacted with the genre. "In the *Victoria* he treated biography as a

craft; he submitted to its limitations. In the *Elizabeth* he treated biography as an art; he flouted its limitations.” (TAB 122)

In ‘The New Biography’ Woolf saw the biographer’s challenge in uniting ‘granite and rainbow’, fact and fiction. Now she makes a distinction between ‘art’ and ‘craft’. Looking at biography as craft, the biographer needs to respect and not transgress the genre’s ‘limitations’, while in art those limitations can be ‘flouted’. Woolf comes back to her earlier distinction between ‘truth of fact’ and ‘truth of fiction’, and bases this distinction now on verification and authentication (TAB 122). “[F]acts that can be verified by other people besides the artist” (TAB 123) are “a necessary element in biography” (TAB 124) and therefore a necessary ‘limitation’ because “the invented character lives in a free world where the facts are verified by one person only – the artist himself. Their authenticity lies in the truth of his own vision” (TAB 124). According to Virginia Woolf, the biographer “has the right to all the facts that are available” (TAB 124) exactly because he is bound by facts.

Virginia Woolf experienced the conflict between biography as art and biography as craft firsthand while writing her only ‘real’ biography – that of the art historian Roger Fry – which was published in 1940. This biography was received with mixed feelings. Bernard Blackstone (109) calls it “a solid, an attractive, but not a brilliant book.” He perceives its ‘fault’ in the lack of vision (as can be found in her novels), enthusiastic criticism (her essays), or fantasy (as in *Orlando* or *Flush*) (Blackstone 192). His conclusion is that the work misses “dramatic force” (Blackstone 192). Woolf had been commissioned by Fry’s family to write her friend’s biography and although she was directed by her desire to revolutionise biography, she came across various restrictions in her writing endeavour. Her ‘vision’ and the ‘facts’ of *Roger Fry* clashed (Lee, VW 12). The need for discretion – Woolf did not reveal the long affair between Fry and her sister Vanessa Bell – and the frustration of being denied all the facts available by Fry’s family, friends and associates, made this work, as Elena Gualtieri (359) puts it, “a remarkably guarded and controlled text which shows Woolf the biographer struggling to find a solution to the kind of difficulties that Woolf the reviewer explicitly articulates.”

At the beginning of her essay 'The Art of Biography', Woolf wondered why biographies are "not destined for the immortality which the artist now and then achieves for his creations" (TAB 125). According to Woolf, biographical works are not made for posterity because the biographer needs to work with 'the perishable' – facts, documents, memories – while the artist's imagination "builds with what is durable" (TAB 125). Thus, Woolf comes to the conclusion that the biographer is a craftsman and "his work is not a work of art, but something betwixt and between" (TAB 125). This question of the biography's 'immortality' is closely linked to Woolf's anxieties about the status of 'imaginative' literature and its relation to biography (Gualtieri 357). We have to remember that in 'The New Biography' Woolf tried to redefine the genre by bringing biography out of its subordinate status to literature 'proper', showing its relation to fiction and its tendency to cross generic boundaries (Gualtieri 358). Yet in 'The Art of Biography' she re-confirms biography's subservience to the art of fiction. Here, biography as 'craft' acts as refreshment for the reader's exhaustion from "the intense world of the imagination" (TAB 125). This illustrates again Woolf's own ambivalence towards the modern biography. As soon as biography seems to cross over into the realm of 'pure', 'imaginative' literature, Woolf re-establishes firm boundaries – biography as craft subservient to the art of fiction (Gualtieri 358). This inconsistency in her theories seems to relate to her emphasis on the 'art' of fiction that can be found in all her writings throughout her writing career, and to her believe that only in fiction personality and the self can be described truthfully (Monk 29).

The work that illustrates best Woolf's struggle to combine the 'truth of fact' with the 'truth of fiction' and to capture one's personality and 'essence' accurately is *Orlando: A Biography*, the fictionalised portrait of her friend Vita Sackville-West. Although Virginia Woolf practiced various forms of life-writing, only three of her works were subtitled 'A Biography': *Roger Fry* (1940), *Flush* (1933) and *Orlando* (1928). While *Roger Fry* is often called a "conventional biography" (Steele xxi), and *Flush* is regarded as fictional biography because it tells the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning from the viewpoint of her spaniel Flush, critics are unsure what 'category' *Orlando* belongs to. Is it a biography like its subtitle claims? Or a

fictional biography? A fantasy, perhaps? Or is it a novel pretending to be a biography by using biographical conventions such as preface, acknowledgements, index and pictures of the subject? (Steele xxi)

Orlando is based on Vita Sackville-West¹⁹ with whom Virginia Woolf had a passionate but also painful affair as Sackville-West could not be described as a 'constant' person. Woolf's diaries and letters provide insights into the conception and execution of this 'mock biography'. She had the idea for *Orlando* on Wednesday 5 October 1927 and notes in her diary, "And instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another" (Woolf, *Diary III* 161).

The reader first meets Orlando as a youth in sixteenth century England, follows the young nobleman to the courts of Elizabeth I and Charles II and travels with him as ambassador to Constantinople where Orlando miraculously changes from man to woman. She returns to England where she leads the life of a literary aristocrat during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. We leave her in 'the present moment' – 1928 – of aeroplanes and motorcars, being a prize-winning author and mother of a boy (Gilbert xxv).

In *Orlando*, the relationship between the biographer and his subject can be analysed on two levels: on the surface or textual level we see Orlando and his/her biographer; on a personal level readers find Virginia Woolf and her perceptions of Vita Sackville-West. They can observe a "lover constructing the beloved" (Smith 60). Woolf was very aware of the complex interactions between fiction and the real, and the way the boundaries between public and private would be pushed to their limits in this work. As a consequence, Virginia Woolf asked Vita in a letter – dated October 9th, 1927 – for permission to use Vita's life and her secrets in *Orlando*,

[...] But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its [sic] all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind [...] –

¹⁹ Vita Sackville-West was married to Harold Nicolson but they led an 'open' marriage. Both had affairs with the same sex but remained 'loyal' to each other. Moreover, Sackville-West was a very successful and popular writer in her own right (see Smith 65-66).

suppose there's the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people, as the lustre on an oyster shell [...] Shall you mind? Say yes, or No [...] Also, I admit, I should like to untwine and twist again some very odd, incongruous strands in you: [...]; and also, as I told you, it sprung upon me how I could revolutionise biography in a night: and so if agreeable to you I would like to toss this up in the air and see what happens. Yet, of course, I may not write another line. (Woolf, *Letters III* 428-429)

Vita replied promptly two days later and agreed to pose for *Orlando*,

My God, Virginia, if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando. What fun for you; what fun for me...You have my full permission. Only I think that having drawn and quartered me, unwound and retwisted me, or whatever it is that you intend to do, you ought to dedicate it to your victim. (Woolf, *Letters III* 429, footnote)

As can be deduced from this correspondence, both women were very enthusiastic about Woolf's biographical project. Thus, important details of Vita's life feature in *Orlando*: her passionate affair with Violet Trefusis who she called 'Lushka' (the Russian Sasha in the book); her Spanish grandmother (in *Orlando* as well as in 'real' life called 'Rosina Pepita'); the courtship of Lord Lascelles (Duke/Duchess of Scand-op-Boom); the travels to the East (become the Turkish episode); her transvestism (the eighteenth-century escapades); the winning of the Hawthornden Prize for 'The Land' (becomes in *Orlando* the 'Burdett Coutts Prize' for 'The Oak Tree'); the lawsuit to gain possession of Knoles; and her marriage to the very accommodating bisexual Harold Nicolson (Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine) (Gilbert xxviii-xix). Woolf remarks in her letter that she "could revolutionise biography in a night" and bring forth a new kind of biography by blending together the quintessence of truth with the artistry of fiction (Smith 59). This 'new' biography "produces the substance of truth in the sense that a fictionalized Vita (as Orlando) reveals essential aspects of her character that a factual biography might not" (Smith 59). Yet, "the balance between truth & fantasy must be careful", as Woolf writes in her diary (Woolf, *Diary III* 162).

Reading the letters above, one notices that Woolf and Sackville-West were not only aware of the relationship between biographer-biographee that they are

entering, but they also see the potential to shape the subject to one's liking – Virginia's "untwine and twist" - and being shaped by the biographer's imagination – Vita's "unwound and retwisted". Woolf rewrites Sackville-West's life and affairs with her lovers to Vita's advantage (Smith 65). The sex change, for example, enables Vita/Orlando to take possession of her ancestor's estate, Knole, which is restored to Orlando when she is declared female. In 'real' life, Sackville-West could not take over Knole exactly because she was female. To Victoria Smith (67) *Orlando* is not just a rewriting of a person's history but a "compensation for losses": Vita can mourn the loss of Knole and the painful end of her affair with Violet Trefusis; Woolf can come to terms with her loss of Sackville-West (Smith 67). *Orlando* enables Virginia Woolf to take possession of her subject, "establishing a kind of power over [Vita's] life, laying claim to it and wooing her as no other lover had" (Smith 66).

One of *Orlando*'s most important features is its criticism of the all-knowing, voyeuristic biographer. Woolf herself appears as a metabiographer²⁰ and "wittily parodies the intrusive and often absurd speculations of the scholar who presumes to know the 'truth' about the 'life' and 'self' of his subject" (Gilbert xxix). Moreover, she mocks the 'conventional' biographer or chronicler,

Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. (Woolf, *Orlando* 12)

The voyeuristic biographer is ever-present in *Orlando* and litters the narrative with comments on Orlando's appearance, character, behaviour and human relationships:

Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore. (Woolf, *Orlando* 12)

[...] and the biographer should here call attention to the fact that this clumsiness is often mated with a love of solitude. Having stumbled

²⁰ Gilbert (xxix) defines the metabiographer as "a writer who both deploys and criticizes the form in which she is working".

over a chest, Orlando naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone. (Woolf, *Orlando* 14)

For Orlando's taste was broad; he was no lover of garden flowers only; the wild and the weeds even had always a fascination for him. Here, indeed, we lay bare rudely, as a biographer may, a curious trait in him, [...] (Woolf, *Orlando* 20)

Not only does the biographer shape our 'image' of Orlando, but his worldview also influences our perceptions of his subject. Yet, at the same time, he also thinks critically about the genre itself and reflects on his own role as biographer, and on how to condense the 'richness' of a human life into the literary, two-dimensional form that is biography:

Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer [...]. Thought and life are as the poles asunder. Therefore – since sitting in a chair and thinking is precisely what Orlando is doing now – there is nothing for it but to recite the calendar, tell one's beads, blow one's nose, stir the fire, look out of the window, until she has done. Orlando sat so still that you could have heard a pin drop. Would, indeed, that a pin had dropped! That would have been life of a kind. Or if a butterfly had fluttered through the window and settled on her chair, one could write about that. Or suppose she had got up and killed a wasp. Then, at once, we could out with our pens and write. For there would be bloodshed, if only the blood of a wasp. Where there is blood there is life. And if killing a wasp is the merest trifle compared with killing a man, still it is a fitter subject for novelist or biographer than this mere wool-gathering; this thinking; this sitting in a chair day in, day out, with a cigarette and a sheet of paper and a pen and an inkpot. If only subjects, we might complain (for our patience is wearing thin), had more consideration for their biographers! What is more irritating than to see one's subject, on whom one has lavished so much time and trouble, slipping out of one's grasp altogether and indulging – witness her sighs and gasps, her flushing, her palings, her eyes now bright and as lamps, now haggard as dawns – what is more humiliating than to see all this dumb show of emotion and excitement gone through before our eyes when we know that what causes it – thought and imagination – are of no importance whatsoever? [...] If then, the subject of one's biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and so leave her. (Woolf, *Orlando*, 184-188)

Reading *Orlando*, we notice the strong presence of Virginia Woolf in the voice of the ever-present but invisible biographer. Her reflections on the nature and limitations of biography, the blurring of the 'truth of fact' with 'personality' that were expressed in her essay 'The New Biography', and would be addressed later again in 'The Art of Biography', are showcased in *Orlando* too:

Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them into a case, often of the most incongruous, for the poet has a butcher's face and the butcher a poet's; [...] (Woolf, *Orlando* 55)

In many passages we believe to see Virginia Woolf herself as she struggles to bring to paper the 'richness' of Vita's intangible life while she has an abundance of tangible 'facts' ready. Moreover, she is aware of the unpredictability and unreliability of memory – the memory of the subject, of the witnesses and of the biographer:

Memory is a seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the underlinen of a family of fourteen on a line in a gale of wind. Instead of being a single, downright, bluff piece of work of which no man need feel ashamed, our commonest deeds are set about with a fluttering and flickering of wings, a rising and falling of lights. (Woolf, *Orlando* 55)

Orlando is a daring, experimental biographical enterprise which not only draws attention to "the fluidity and the artifice of gender" (Gilbert xvii) but is also "both a comment on history and a meditation on time" (Gilbert xxix). In this narrative, time is defined by Orlando's emotional and intellectual experiences which effect his/her perception of time's duration (Gilbert xxx). Moreover, Woolf highlights and calls into question the biographical convention to ascribe a certain 'spirit' to an 'age' by letting Orlando's character assimilate the 'spirit' of five 'ages'. She shows the absurdity of the idea of historical transition by transferring Orlando suddenly from one age to another (Gilbert xxi).

As Smith (60) notes, *Orlando* is an extremely difficult narrative to classify: it has been labelled as anti-novel, metafiction, magical realism, Künstlerroman, roman à clef, female autobiography and biography. Ray Monk (29) calls *Orlando*'s subtitle 'A Biography' "a joke". Although Woolf uses biographical conventions (index, pictures, etc.) she subverts them by mixing fact with "a controlled form of fantasy as a means for the transmission of personality" (Monk 28). Further, he explains that *Orlando* is *not* a biography because Woolf believed that "[o]nly in fiction could she capture the truth about Vita, because the truth about a person is 'truth of fiction' rather than 'truth of fact' (Monk 29). Victoria Smith prefers Marjorie Garber's definition as a 'fairy tale à clef'. While the roman à clef depicts real persons under fictitious names in a realistic setting who can be uncovered if the reader has 'the key', the 'fairy tale à clef' is a kind of "double veiling – covering people and events through name changes and then covering them once more through the magical nature of the fairy tale" (Smith 61). In this sense, *Orlando* becomes a cryptic text whose message can only be decoded with the right 'key'. In *Orlando*, the key would be Vita Sackville-West's life-story, her affairs, and her relationship to her 'biographer' – Virginia Woolf.

Modernist experiments and discussions in biography, as well as Freudian psychoanalysis, opened up new possibilities for a genre that had become too earnest during the Victorian period. Many features used by contemporary, postmodern writers and biographers go back to this time full of opportunities and aesthetic experiments. Modernist biography is often characterized as being truthful and playful, using fictional devices like irony and parody. We find satiric life-sketches, an emphasis on childhood and sexuality, explorations on how biography can be written, and fictionalized quests that try to uncover the 'real' self and 'inner life' of the biographer and his subject (see Lee, *Introduction* 72-73 & 90-91). Postmodern writers not only continue the modernist tradition, but try to go even further, challenging again generic boundaries and experimenting with the blurring of the 'truth of fact' with the 'truth of fiction'.

2.2. Postmodern Concept of History: Historiographic Metafiction

Scholars have often remarked on the difficulty to define postmodernism. One might characterise it as a “set of ideas and practices that reject hierarchy, stability and categorization” (de Groot 109). Various postmodern theories have been established which question our perception of ‘reality’, ‘history’ and its representations. Jacques Derrida theorised that “the world is innately unknowable and unstable” and systems are in a “constant state of flux” (de Groot 110). He suggested a break between signifier and signified in linguistics, a disparity between word and thing, which in turn denotes a divergence between representation, writing and communication (see de Groot 110). Another theory is based on Jean-François Lyotard’s idea of the ‘grand narratives’. According to him, postmodernism intends to undermine master narratives which aim to put everything into neat categorizations and which represent an “organisational and representational tyranny” (de Groot 110).

Moreover, postmodernism scrutinises history and historical writing. It seeks to undermine the master narrative ‘history’ as it is a textual construct based on a signifier and a signified which do not match, and is therefore questionable. Roland Barthes makes us aware that historical writing tries to capture the ‘truth’ of reality by using fictional devices. He states in his *Discourse of History* (1967) that

this narrative style of history, which draws its ‘truth’ from the careful attention to narration, the architecture of articulations and the abundance of expanded elements (known, in this case, as ‘concrete details’). So the circle of paradox is complete. Narrative structure, which was originally developed within the cauldron of fiction (in myths and the first epics) becomes at once the sign and the proof of reality. (qtd. in de Groot 110)

Barthes’ observations were also applied to historical fiction which strives for ‘historical’ authenticity but uses fictional tropes to achieve this aim. The acknowledgment that ‘reality’ is impossible to recreate in historical writing is partly responsible for the ‘postmodern turn’ in historiographical writing (de Groot 111). Among theorists who took up this line of thought, it was especially Hayden

White who affirmed that “rhetoric and metaphor are integral parts of history writing, and that ‘History’ is a narrative form itself rather than an account of historical ‘truth’” (de Groot 111).

Linda Hutcheon (*Poetics* 3) argues that postmodernism is paradoxical, “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges”. In order to characterise postmodern fiction Linda Hutcheon devised a theory which she called ‘historiographic metafiction’. She based her theoretical model on postmodern architecture as discussed by Paolo Portoghesi, Charles Jencks, Aldo Rossi, Robert Stern or Charles Moore (Hutcheon, *Poetics* ix).

According to Hutcheon (*Poetics* 5), historiographic metafiction designates “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages”. Its aim is “to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically and formally” (*Poetics* 108). Postmodernism questions the concept of ‘history’, but as Hutcheon ascertains, the postmodern is neither ahistorical nor dehistoricised. Yet it casts doubt upon “our (perhaps unacknowledged) assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* xii). Historiographic metafiction examines the relation between the historical discourse and the literary and addresses issues like narrative form, intertextuality, strategies of representation, the role of language, “the relation between historical fact and experiential event, and [...] the epistemological and ontological consequences of the act of rendering problematic that which was once taken for granted by historiography – and literature” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* xii). Moreover, Linda Hutcheon explains that historiographic metafiction suggests that it would be wrong to consider fiction in terms of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’, as there is not just one truth opposed by falsity, but there are other truths which depend on the point of view. Additionally, historiographic metafiction establishes and then crosses the generic boundaries or frames which make up the narratives ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ (see Hutcheon, *Poetics* 109-110).

Linda Hutcheon's claim that historiographic metafiction "defines postmodernism" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 52) goes too far, according to some scholars. Ansgar Nünning reflects that this postulation – historiographic metafiction as defining postmodernism – "sounds suspiciously like yet another master narrative, and it is by no means the only [...] story, but merely one of several competing 'narratives of postmodernism'" (Nünning, *Crossing Borders* 219). Also, Rüdiger Imhof states "that historiographic metafiction is one class of metafiction among many" (qtd. in Nünning, *Crossing Borders* 219). In addition, critics have observed that the query for 'truth' in historiography is not limited to postmodern scepticism, "but is instead a reflection of a persistent inquiry into the limits of historical knowledge that can be traced back both to eighteenth-century philosophers and to American short-story writers" ("historiographic metafiction" 216). It has also been put forth that the 'popularity' of historiographic metafiction corresponds to the rise of the historical novel as literary genre ("historiographic metafiction" 216).

Nevertheless, historiographic metafiction provides a valuable theory which "self-consciously explores the status and function of narrative as an ideological construct shaping history and forging identity rather than merely representing the past" ("historiographic metafiction" 216). Moreover, it is more concerned with "the reconstruction of the past from the point of view of the present" ("historiographic metafiction" 216) than it is with 'real' facts, historical events or people. History is a system which is "accessible only as a narrative produced by human beings who remember, interpret, and represent events from a particular point of view" ("historiographic metafiction" 216). Historiographic metafiction emphasises that history and fiction are human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*), and its self-awareness forms the basis of the "rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 5). To re-write or re-present history in postmodern fiction means to open up the past to the present and prevent it from being conclusive (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 110).

2.3. Postmodern Genre-Blurring

Postmodern novels like A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* and *The Biographer's Tale*, Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* and *Hawksmoor*, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, to name only a few among many, present new and innovate ways to depict the past. They use postmodern features such as fragmentation, metafictionality, intertextuality, dislocation, discontinuity, self-reflexivity, as well as the blurring of genres (Nünning, *Crossing Borders* 218). It appears that this crossing and blurring of generic boundaries between "fact and fiction, history and myth, historiography and historical fiction, individual stories and collective history" (Nünning, *Crossing Borders* 217) is one of the defining characteristics of postmodern (historical) novels.

Taking Byatt's *Possession* as example, we see the clashing of genres at its best: the novel can be interpreted as a historical, postmodern, realistic, and research or campus novel, as well as a romance, mystery, pastiche, satire or neo-Victorian novel.²¹ Jackie Buxton "reworks" the term of Linda Hutcheon and identifies this work as "historiographic (detective) metafiction" (qtd. in Hadley 52), as elements of detective fiction are worked into the novel's structure. Susanne Becker emphasises 'the gothic' in Byatt's novel as it engages in 'excess' – which is according to Becker "a transgression of the real, the natural and the rational" (qtd. in Hadley 56-67) and is a defining feature of gothic fiction. Moreover, Byatt has skilfully drawn various text types together so that they form a unity: letters appear alongside journal entries, we are able to read excerpts of a biography, a part of an autobiography, as well as pieces of a travelogue. Poems and short stories bring to life the works of two (fictional) Victorian poets, and quotes from research papers with their footnotes bestow 'authenticity' and credibility upon these works.

Another example for the crossing of generic boundaries can be found if we look at Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction. It unites

²¹ See Louisa Hadley's *The Fiction of A. S. Byatt*, chapter four and five; Hansson 357; Adams 107.

historiography and metafiction. Historiography, in turn, also crosses boundaries: Michel de Certeau observed that

[h]istoriography (that is, 'history' and 'writing') bears within its own name the paradox – almost an oxymoron – of a relation established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse. Its task is one of connecting them and, at the point where this link cannot be imagined, of working as *if* the two were being joined. (qtd. in Nünning, *Fictional metabiographies* 196-197).

One might get the feeling that one is given a Chinese box-set where one layer of meaning hides or initiates another layer. By analogy to de Certeau's interpretation, it is possible to join paradoxical systems like biography ('life'- 'writing') and fiction, so that genre distinctions like factual biography, fictional biography, and other generic variants of fictional biography are established (see Nünning, *Fictional Metabiographies* 197). According to Ansgar Nünning, fictional metabiographies "[challenge] the conventions of biography and autobiography"; they examine "the problems of auto/biographic reconstruction, exemplifying the paradoxes of life-writing"; and highlight "that biography [...] is a subjective and constructive process which does not reproduce the past but is only an intellectual construct" (Nünning, *Fictional Metabiographies* 197). The blurring of fact and fiction witnessed in recent biographies and biographical criticism has led Ina Schabert (*Fictional Biography* 1) to observe that "biography as a whole is drifting toward fiction." Leon Edel, for instance, states that the biographer can "be as imaginative as he pleases, so long as he does not imagine his facts" (qtd. in Schabert, *Fictional Biography* 1). Other critics ask for a more strict division between biography and the biographical novel (see Schabert, *Fictional Biography* 1-3).

This blurring and crossing of generic boundaries might give the impression that genres are negated. Yet, according to Rolf Breuer, the opposite is the case. Rolf Breuer notes that "das Handwerkszeug der Literaturwissenschaft, die Begrifflichkeit [...] angesichts neuer Gattungen und Gattungsmischungen geschärft und erweitert werden [muss], aber deswegen müssen nicht etwa die Kategorien aufgeweicht werden" (qtd. in Nünning, *Fictional Metabiographies* 195). This means that the creation of new-coined (sub-) genres does not invite

a mellowing of categories; instead it firmly establishes the importance of generic classification.

Historiographic metafiction can be identified as archetypical postmodern genre. It plays with and transgresses boundary lines so that the borders between fact and fiction become blurred. As a consequence, history is presented as if it was fiction, and the invented or fictional is depicted as if it was historical. This tension between history and fiction is a representation of modern historiographic theory which has realised that 'history' is built on fictional structures. Moreover, historiographic metafiction highlights that historical writing is a narrative construct which is based on the narrator's subjective perspective ("historiographic metafiction" 216). Historiographic metafiction with its playful approach towards generic boundary lines is used by novelists with revisionist attitudes to rewrite and re-imagine history.

3. POSTMODERN ATTITUDES TOWARDS BIOGRAPHY AND THE BIOGRAPHER IN A. S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION: A ROMANCE*, JULIAN BARNES' *FLAUBERT'S PARROT* AND PETER ACKROYD'S *CHATTERTON*

Antonia S. Byatt's novel *Possession: A Romance*, Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* and Peter Ackroyd' *Chatterton* are examples for the postmodern scepticism towards biography, the biographer's methods and biographical representations. They highlight the interaction between the past and the present, and act out the belief that the past is impenetrable and unknowable. As a consequence, we see in their works the present re-writing and re-imagining the past, so that a past-present-continuum is established. Readers are made aware that the past lives forth in the present, and that the present moment is fleeting and becomes part of the 'past' within the blink of an eye.

Byatt's, Barnes' and Ackroyd's novels shift the focus from the portrayal of the biographee towards a representation of the biographer in search of his subject. This quest can be understood as a metaphor not only for the impenetrability of the past and the constructedness of life-writing, but also as critique of the voyeuristic desires of society. We may ask naively: why are so many writers against biography? Are they not happy that people are interested in their lives? Usually writers object to biography because they understand it to be "a reductionist simplification, a grotesque travesty of what they do, and an interference with a writer's main ambition – which is to be judged by, and remembered for, their writing" (Lee, *Introduction* 98). Doris Lessing reflects in her autobiography *Under My Skin* (1994) on the reason for an artist to write an autobiography. Wittily she remarks: "Self-defence; biographies are being written" (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 98).

The negative opinion of biography is not just a contemporary phenomenon. 'The Case against biography' can be traced back to the modernist movement with its aesthetic and elitist notions. As Hermione Lee (*Introduction* 93) explains, during that time "the idea of separateness and purity – or amorality – of the work of art"

was a major principle to which artists adhered to. Therefore, the “artist-as-person – what Yeats famously called ‘the bundle of accidents and incoherence that sits down to breakfast’” (Lee, *Introduction* 93) had to be kept separate from the ‘artist-at-work’. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* James Joyce claims that “[t]he artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 93). Hermione Lee (*Introduction* 93-94) explains that modernist manifestos like Joyce’s “had a lasting effect on the Anglo-American academic school of ‘new criticism’, which rejected biography as a ‘fallacious quest for the origins of works: fallacious, because anything relevant to an autonomous work was by definition contained within it’”. Modernism’s negative opinion of biography influenced theorists like Roland Barthes who declared ‘the death of the author’ (Lee, *Introduction* 94) and reduced him to “[n]o more than an unobtrusive pocketful of ‘biographemes’” (Wall 294).

However, the hostility towards biography can not only manifest itself in an aesthetic critique, but also in “ethical objections to its intrusiveness” (Lee, *Introduction* 95). Where is the dividing line between public and private? How far can a biographer go in his efforts to make the biographee available to the greater public? An infamous case was the fight between Sylvia Plath’s biographers and Ted Hughes who wanted to defend his and his family’s privacy by controlling Plath’s literary legacy (Lee, *Body Parts* 7).

Biography in all its forms – from the mass market paperback to the lavishly crafted lives of artists, political leaders and historical personages – is an extremely popular genre. The ‘death of biography’ is not in sight. From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s a boom in life-writing could be observed which led Robert Fulford to call this era the “Age of Biography” (qtd. in Podnieks 3). Yet, there are other voices who envision the end of the ‘golden age’ of biography. In 2008 Kathryn Hughes published an obituary for biography in the *Guardian* titled ‘The Death of Life Writing’. She detects a crisis in life-writing which is caused by “aesthetic weakness”. Hughes is of the opinion that the literary value of the

genre has deteriorated, and artistic principles were replaced by “crowd-pleasing” in order to achieve bigger sales (Podnieks 4).

Michael Holroyd, on the other hand is more optimistic. He sees a second golden age of biography having arrived with Richard Holmes’ *Dr Johnson and Mr Savage* (1993); the first one was heralded by Johnson’s *Life of Savage* (1744). Moreover, he rises to the genre’s defence when he states, “Biography will continue to change, will become more personal, more idiosyncratic, imaginative, experimental, more hybrid, and will move further from the comprehensive ‘Life and Letters’ structure” (Holroyd, *Works* 30).

For a long time biography was regarded as merely a mass market product that caters to the desires of the consumers, unworthy of academic study. Jacques Derrida, for example, declared that “biography is a contaminated genre” (Podnieks 11), and Epstein said that “the discursive practice of biography abducts and defiles the subject” (Podnieks 11). Fairly recently (compared to other fields of academic study) – in 1978 – the Center for Biographical Research was established by the University of Hawaii; in Canberra is the Biography Institute at the Australian National University; and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Biographie²², which is “dedicated to the ‘systematic’ study of the History and Theory of Biography” (Lee, *Introduction* 94), was established in Vienna in April 2005. Moreover, in 2008, the Leon Levy Center for Biography was launched by the Graduate Center of CUNY (Podnieks 7). In addition, since the late 1970s several journals that specialise in biography have been founded, called *Biography*, *Auto/Biography*, *Life Writing*, and *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* (Podnieks 7).

Still, there are controversies surrounding biography, the biographer’s work and biographical depictions. Postmodernists’ sceptical attitude towards the genre finds voice in novels such as Byatt’s *Possession* and *The Biographer’s Tale*, Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*, Julian Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Kingsley Amis’ *The Biographer’s Moustache*, William Golding’s *The Paper Men* and Philip

²² See Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Biographie: <http://gtb.lbg.ac.at/> (last accessed 06 December 2011).

Roth's *Exit Ghost*. Fictional biographers are usually depicted as vultures that hover over the remains of the helpless artist. As Hermione Lee (*Introduction* 99) observes, they are for the most part depicted "as parasites, obsessives, or stalkers." Furthermore, these novels confound readers by criticising the methods with which biographers attain their materials, and point out the constructedness of biographical representations.

3.1. A Short Introduction to Byatt, Barnes and Ackroyd and their Novels

Antonia Susan Byatt published *Possession: A Romance* in 1990, for which she won the Booker Prize and the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize the same year. In 1990 she was appointed CBE²³ for her contribution to British literature, and DBE²⁴ in 1999. Born in 1936 in Yorkshire, she was educated in York, Cambridge and Oxford. She taught at the Central School of Art and Design, and became a full-time Lecturer in English and American Literature at University College in London in 1972 (and Senior Lecturer in 1981). She has been a full-time writer since 1983, and has published novels, short-stories, and criticism. Her first novel *Shadow of a Sun* was published in 1964. She received much recognition for her quartet that follows the story of a Yorkshire family: *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Still Life* (1985), *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002). Byatt is known as distinguished critic and has written two books on Iris Murdoch – *Degrees of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1965) and *Iris Murdoch: A Critical Study* (1976) – as well as *Wordsworth and Coleridge in Their Time* (1970). Her latest novel is *The Children's Book* (2009) which was shortlisted for the 2009 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and won the 2010 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction.²⁵

Byatt's most successful novel to date, which was also turned into a Hollywood movie²⁶ in 2000, is *Possession: A Romance*. It is the story of two literary scholars – Roland Michell and Dr Maud Bailey – who want to find out the truth

²³ Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

²⁴ Dame Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

²⁵ See the British Council's Contemporary Writers Directory: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/a-s-byatt> (last accessed 04 December 2011).

²⁶ Directed by Neil LaBute and starring Gwyneth Paltrow as Maud Bailey, Aaron Eckhart as Roland Michell, Jeremy Northam as Randolph Henry Ash, and Jennifer Ehle as Christabel LaMotte.

about the relationship between two mid-Victorian poets – Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. Roland Michell, who is a specialist on Ash, discovers two passionate, previously unknown letters written by R. H. Ash to an unidentified woman. Following the clues in the letters, he finds out that the letters were addressed to the poetess Christabel LaMotte. He consults with Dr Maud Bailey, a distant relative of LaMotte who is a feminist scholar, in order to find out more about the real relationship between those two who are known to scholars as a ‘faithful’ husband and the reclusive spinster poetess. Together, Roland and Maud follow the clues left by the Victorian poets and their contemporaries’ letters, diaries and poems. They discover the (almost) complete correspondence of Ash and LaMotte. Roland and Maud trace the Victorians’ movements from London to the North Yorkshire coast, and to the west of Brittany where LaMotte gave birth to a child. However, the scholars do not know what happened to the baby. By now, they are not alone in their chase after Ash and LaMotte. Hot on their heels is Ash’s American biographer – Professor Mortimer Cropper – who is an Ash fanatic and tries to buy up all of the poet’s letters and relics. The editor of Ash’s *Complete Works*, Professor James Blackadder, and the feminist critic Leonora Stern join the chase. The literary mystery reaches its climax when Cropper and Hildebrand Ash dig up the secret which was buried with Ash: in an Agatha Christie-like denouement where all the characters are present (save Ash and LaMotte), they open and read the letter that reveals that Maud is the direct descendant of Ash’s and LaMotte’s love child.

Possession is an extraordinary literary mystery which takes readers on a voyage of discovery. It captures the audience’s attention by combining the “seductive readerly qualities of the Victorian novel” with the “deconstructive effects of *Possession*’s historiographic self-consciousness” (Wells 670). Moreover, it looks critically at the biographer’s methods and exposes academic rivalry. It aims to point out that it is impossible to possess the past or one’s biographical subject.

Julian Barnes was born in 1946 in Leicester and was educated in London and Oxford. He worked as a lexicographer on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as

journalist, literary editor and television critic of *The Observer*. His first novel *Metroland* was published in 1980 and was followed by *Before She Met Me* (1982) and *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984). He received much praise for *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), *Talking It Over* (1991), and *Cross Channel* (1996). *England, England* (1998) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction. In 2005 he published *Arthur and George* which was inspired by true story of a solicitor who was accused of a crime, and saved by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Barnes is very successful in England and France and was awarded a number of prizes on both sides of the channel. His love for France and French life and culture found its expression in a collection of essays called *Something to Declare: French Essays* which he published in 2002. Moreover, Barnes is the editor and translator of the first English translation of the 19th century novelist Alphonse Daudet's *In the Land of Pain*. Barnes published his memoir titled *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* in 2008. His latest novel *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) was winner of the 2011 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.²⁷

Julian Barnes' highly acclaimed novel *Flaubert's Parrot* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction, won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the Prix Médicis in France. It relates the story of Geoffrey Braithwaite who wants to write the biography of Gustave Flaubert. He travels to France in order to get a 'feeling' for the 19th century writer. He visits Flaubert's birth place and looks at the exhibits at his last residence. There, in the Hôtel-Dieu and in Croisset, Braithwaite comes across two parrots which both claim to be the 'original' model for the parrot called Loulou in Flaubert's novel *Un Coeur simple*. This discovery sets off his quest to find out which parrot is the 'authentic' one. As Braithwaite tells us, it takes him two years "to solve the Case of the Stuffed Parrot" (FP 180). He meets with Monsieur Lucien Andrieu, a Flaubert scholar, who tells him, "Flaubert was an artist. He was a writer of the imagination. And he would alter a fact for the sake of a cadence; he was like that. Just because he borrowed a parrot, why should he describe it as it was?" (FP 188) Finally, after having followed various clues, Braithwaite comes face to face with the remaining three (of the original fifty) parrots that could have modeled for Loulou. He concedes,

²⁷ See the British Council's Contemporary Writers Directory: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/julian-barnes> (last accessed 04 December 2011).

“Perhaps it was one of them” (*FP* 190). Geoffrey Braithwaite’s obsession with Flaubertian facts and *Loulou* covers up the traumatic story of his wife Ellen, their unhappy marriage, and her suicide, as well as his own experience during the war.

Flaubert’s *Parrot* is a failed attempt at biography. It emphasizes that behind every biography hides the story of its biographer.

Peter Ackroyd is famous for his innovative and ingenious biographies, as well as for his formal experiments in fiction. Born in 1949 in London, he graduated from Clare College in Cambridge and studied at Yale University as Mellon Fellow. Ackroyd worked as literary editor, managing editor and film critic. He has been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature since 1984, and was appointed a CBE in 2003. Ackroyd made himself known with *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) which pretends to be Oscar Wilde’s autobiography. It won the Somerset Maugham Award. His biography *T. S. Eliot* (1984) proved to be a challenge, as Ackroyd was forbidden to quote from most of Eliot’s poetry and unpublished correspondence. The biographies of Charles Dickens (1990) and William Blake (1995) followed. London is a recurring theme in Ackroyd’s oeuvre. His fascination with London resulted in two biographies of the city: *London: The Biography* (2000) and *Thames: Sacred River* (2007). His first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982), was followed by *Hawksmoor* (1985), *Chatterton* (1987), and *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* which was published in 2008. Ackroyd wrote three collections of poetry, literary criticism and two plays. His most recent works are titled *The English Ghost* (2010), *The Death of King Arthur* (2010), and *Foundation: The History of England Volume 1* was published in 2011.²⁸

Chatterton is a showpiece of intertextual allusions, forgery and plagiarism. It emphasises how the past and the present interact. The novel presents three different timelines: One is set in the 18th century and follows the ‘forger-poet’ Thomas Chatterton who at the age of fifteen or sixteen composed the famous

²⁸ See the British Council’s Contemporary Writers Directory: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/peter-ackroyd> (last accessed 04 December 2011).

Rowley sequence in an authentic medieval style. His pretence at the medieval style was so good that the public believed the poems to be penned by a monk named Thomas Rowley. Chatterton's story continues in 1770, the year Chatterton died at the age of seventeen in London. Ackroyd theorises on the cause of the poet's early death – did he take arsenic to commit suicide or was it a tragic accident? The second timeline is set in 1856, the year Henry Wallis composed his famous painting *Death of Chatterton*. It was his friend George Meredith who slipped into the role of Chatterton and re-enacted the romantic poet's death scene. After the painting was completed, Meredith's wife Mary left her husband for Wallis. The third timeline is set in the 20th century. It presents the (fictional) story of Charles Wychwood who discovers the portrait of a middle-aged man who is identified by his friend Philip Slack as Thomas Chatterton. Charles wants to solve the mystery of the painting. Following some leads, Charles and Philip travel to Bristol where Charles receives the 'Chatterton papers': an autobiographic manuscript which states that Chatterton forged his own death and continued to write under pennames, for instance, as William Blake. Charles believes that he has solved the secret of Thomas Chatterton. Harriet Scrope, a novelist who started her writing career by plagiarising a Victorian novelist, wants to get her hands on the Chatterton papers as she is in need of a new plot. However, after Charles' death – he had suffered from a brain tumour – it turns out that both, the painting and the papers were forgeries intended to blacken the reputation of romantic-hero poet, Chatterton. All three timelines interact with each other. This prompts questions like: What is the truth? What is forged? What is art? And, how do we seize the past?

Possession, *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Chatterton* rewrite history in an imaginative way by playing with the distinction between fact and fiction. They present the fictional as if it were real, and depict the historical as if it was invented. As a result, the 'truth' eludes us.

3.2. Deconstructing Biography

Contemporary theoretical discussions of life-writing are concerned with issues like

the inevitable relationships formed between the subject and the biographer, and the inseparability of one's auto from another's bio; [...] the biographer's practical, ethical, and aesthetic uses of fact, truth, fiction, gossip, and myth in fashioning the subject; [and] a post-modern awareness and legitimizing of generic experimentation that affords the biographer innovative [...] re-conceptions of and apprehensions of the subject [...]. (Podnieks 12)

According to Richard Holmes (17-20) biography has to face four main problems (among many others): (1) the questionable ethics of biographical research with its intrusiveness into the private sphere of the subject; (2) the problem of authenticity (biographers employ unreliable sources like memory, memoirs, letters and diaries); (3) its preference for the famous, glamorous or notorious; and (4) the biographer's empathy with his subject and its consequential distortive ramifications for an 'objective' and 'truthful' account of the biographee. As Holmes (20) points out, biography has inherited these problems which "express the original, underlying tension found in its genealogy: Invention marrying Truth". He is of the opinion that these issues – "of ethics, authenticity, celebrity, and empathy" (Holmes 25) – must be discussed so that the genre 'biography' can thrive in the future.

These and other problems of biography are addressed to various degrees by Antonia S. Byatt, Julian Barnes and Peter Ackroyd. They show that they are familiar with current developments in the practice and theory of biography. In their novels – *Possession*, *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Chatterton* – they skilfully undermine the reader's notions about life-writing by confronting us with the deconstruction of biographical conventions. In a sense, they take us readers 'behind the scenes' in order to observe the biographer, scholar or amateur sleuth at work. As a consequence, we are able to look over the biographers' shoulders as they construct a subjective image of their subject. We take part in their quest to find out the truth about their biographee. Yet, in doing so, they make us realise that an 'authentic' portrayal is impossible. Instead, readers

recognise how fallible the idea of a truthful, complete representation of the biographee (no matter if dead or alive) is. Byatt's, Barnes' and Ackroyd's aim is to make us confront our perceptions of history, of the past, and of life-writing. They want to shatter "our naive but common trust in the representational veracity" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 10) of biography.

Possession, *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Chatterton* draw attention to the constructedness of biography, of historical writing, and of the past by scattering their narratives with metafictional questions and self-reflexive comments. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, for example, Geoffrey Braithwaite asks, "How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?" (*FP* 14) By using these devices, writers not only point outside the text to make us aware that history is a human construct (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 16), but also highlight their own work's fictionality. Linda Hutcheon (146) explains that historiographic metafiction, "while teasing us with the existence of the past as real, also suggests that there is no direct access to the real which would be unmediated by the structures of our various discourses about it."

Patricia Waugh devised a definition of metafiction based on the theories of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes (see de Groot 117). She states that metafiction is "a term given to fictional writing which consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2). As our world, our reality, and our history are thought of as provisional and artificial constructs, writers no longer want to adhere to conservative, realistic modes of representation – chronology, the omniscient narrator and narrative linearity – but turn to devices which question and undermine these traditional methods (Waugh 7). Consequently, metafiction foregrounds "the play of the linguistic and representational system and the loss of assurance in articulation (de Groot 117). According to Patricia Waugh (9),

[m]etafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems.

As Waugh points out, the crisis of the novel – the inability to capture the ‘true’ essence of reality, history or a life – has led to a new beginning. By addressing problems of artistic legitimacy, by theorizing about itself, by being metafictional, “the genre [established] an identity and validity within a culture apparently hostile to its printed, linear narrative and conventional assumptions about ‘plot’, ‘character’, ‘authority’ and ‘representation’” (Waugh 10). Metafiction 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 methods.

According to Allen Hibbard (19) biography, like any other genre, “is shaped to a great extent by expectations.” As Hibbard points out, these expectations which are aimed at the genre by its readers, critics and biographers, preserve the form of biography so that it resists too outrageous innovations (Hibbard 19). Hermione Lee (*Introduction* 122) remarks that “[a]ny biographical narrative is an artificial construct, since it inevitably involves selection and shaping.” However, as Virginia Woolf so famously noted in *Orlando*²⁹, it is impossible for the biographer to record every single thought, or every single thing the biographee does. Like the modernists, contemporary biographers also experiment with form, fictional strategies, time and point of view. They may arrange their subject’s life according to thematic sections, instead of a chronological order; and may use a narrative that ‘fits’ their subject (Lee, *Introduction* 122-123). Yet, Lee (*Introduction* 123) acknowledges that “there are some inevitable conventions”:

[T]here will have to be time, place, character, and events. Most biography moves forward and onward, sets the main figure in its context, mixes the plot with accounts of the subject’s work, of historical complexities or of subsidiary characters, and uses description and observation, documentary sources, witness testimony, peripheral materials, and first-hand knowledge to construct the story. (Lee, *Introduction* 124)

The facts which ‘construct’ the biography have to be based on authentic and reliable sources, and interpretations and comments by the biographer should help to make readers understand the complexity of the subject’s personality, so

²⁹ See Chapter 2.1.3.

that readers are able to envision “what made the person tick” (Hibbard 19). Biographies may focus on a particular time in the subject’s life and have different starting points³⁰. Moreover, biographers can decide to leave or conceal blanks in the narrative. They may even integrate moral judgements and personal opinions. Nonetheless, they have to present “as full, intelligible, and accurate a version of the subject’s life as possible” (Lee, *Introduction* 124). Hermione Lee (quite sharply) summarises: “Biography sets out to tell you that a life can be described, summed up, packaged and sold” (Lee, VW 4).

Novels like Byatt’s *Possession*, Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot* and Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* make biography “the subject of sceptical novelistic enquiry” (Lee, *Introduction* 99). In order to highlight the artificiality of the genre ‘biography’, many postmodern novels that can be labelled ‘fictional biography’, ‘literary biography’ ‘fictional metabiography’, or ‘biofiction’, deconstruct biographical conventions such as the ones mentioned above by Hermione Lee. The authorial narrator or biographer is unmasked as being unreliable, the chronological composition becomes achronological, the teleological structure is interrupted by textual inserts, metafictional comments or time leaps. The textual evidence (documents such as letters, journals and manuscripts) is exposed as being manipulated, forged or it goes missing. Moreover, by presenting two or more timelines readers are able to compare ‘actual’ past events to the present’s recovering, reimagining and rewriting of history.

Readers perceive that the totality of the past cannot be grasped and some aspects of past life will forever elude biographers and scholars. As Byatt notes in the chapter called ‘Postscript 1868’ in *Possession* (508): “There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been.” This is also addressed in *Flaubert’s Parrot*, where Julian Barnes famously compares the devising of a biography to fishing:

You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument

³⁰ Hermione Lee lists birth, death, an anecdote, the subject’s posthumous reputation as starting points for a biography (see Lee, *Introduction* 124).

designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it *a collection of holes tied together with string*. You can do the same with biography. The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that. The biography stands, fat and worthy-burgherish on the shelf, boastful and sedate: a shilling life will give you all the facts, a ten-pound one all the hypotheses as well. But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee. What chance would the craftiest biographer stand against the subject who saw him coming and decided to amuse himself? (FP 38, my emphasis)

Defining biography as “a collection of holes tied together with string” (FP 38), points to the issues biographers have to face. Biographers have to ‘form’ a ‘truthful’ and ‘objective’ representation of their subject out of unreliable sources which may have been manipulated (memories, memoirs, anecdotes, diaries, letters, manuscripts, etc.) by applying methods used for fiction (see Holmes 20). As a consequence, an authentic account is impossible. Therefore, biographical metafiction such as *Possession*, *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Chatterton*, depict the biographer's struggle to find out the truth of their subjects' lives. The presentation of a coherent life shifts towards a representation of the biographer's search for his subject, which in turn becomes a quest of self-discovery (see Nünning, *Von der fiktionalen Biographie zur biographischen Metafiktion* 19).

Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, for instance, can be read as the archetypical postmodern novel that plays with the boundary lines between fact and fiction. It is a rewriting of history – and of biography – in an imaginative way. It can be understood as satire of biographical writing and of the effort to write about the ‘truth’. *Flaubert's Parrot* emphasises the constructedness of historical accounts by exposing and parodying biographical conventions. Geoffrey Braithwaite is a first-person narrator who pretends to be writing the biography of Gustave Flaubert. However, Braithwaite is unable to say anything about the ‘authentic’ person; he can only come up with bits and pieces of his subject's life-story, but not with a coherent portrayal of Flaubert (see Hateley 177). His biography

becomes a series of substitutions: Faced with the impossibility to 'capture' the 'real' Flaubert, he presents the biography of Flaubert's statue. This account is in turn replaced with the story of Loulou, the parrot in Flaubert's novel *Un Coeur simple*. However, the quest for the authentic stuffed parrot who modelled for Loulou proves to be a dead end. Again, Braithwaite's narrative changes its focus: it focuses on his and his wife's biography. Instead of the story proper – Flaubert's biography – readers are given replacements which are arranged like Chinese boxes – one narrative hides beneath another. The varied portraits of Flaubert which Braithwaite presents (for example, in form of three different chronologies or the bestiary that Braithwaite constructs) "exemplify the impossibility of such a portrait ever being complete" (Hateley 179).

3.3. Possessing the Past

A. S. Byatt titled her novel aptly *Possession: A Romance*. By labelling *Possession* a romance, Byatt (quoting in her 'introduction' Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*) "wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material" as she attempts "to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us". She wants to breach textual boundaries in order to highlight the illusion of reality, history and biographical representations. Furthermore, Lucile Desblache (89) explains that the novel's "underlying concern with the nature of possession winds its theme through the variations of dependency in love, repression of passion, professional rivalry, [...] and the obsession of biographers and academic writers with the object of their study." Therefore, the title can be understood as criticism of the assumption that historians or biographers are able to 'possess' the past. Rather than being able to gain insight into history, they become obsessed with their subjects, and with the quest to discover their past.

Richard Holmes (17) observes that "[t]he ethics of research into another person's life have always been questionable." Writers and artists have vehemently objected to the biographer's intrusiveness into the artist's private sphere. However, hostility towards biography, and especially towards the biographer, is not a new phenomenon of the 20th century. Already in the 18th

century Dr Arbuthnot lamented that Edmund Curll³¹ had “added a new Terror to Death” (qtd. in Holmes 17). Many writers since then wanted to highlight the viciousness and ruthlessness of the ‘post-mortem exploiter’ by presenting fictional biographers as obsessive, tactless, opportunistic stalkers.

The long and agonising fight between Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath’s biographers inspired the American writer Janet Malcolm in the 1990s to the following hostile criticism of biography and the biographer’s work:

Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world. The biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away. The voyeurism and busybodyism that impel writers and readers of biography alike are obscured by an apparatus of scholarship designed to give the enterprise an appearance of banklike blandness and solidity. The biographer is portrayed almost as a kind of benefactor. He is seen as sacrificing years of his life to his task, tirelessly sitting in archives and libraries and patiently conducting interviews with witnesses. There is no length he will not go to, and the more his book reflects his industry the more the reader believes that he is having an elevating literary experience, rather than listening to backstairs gossip and reading other people’s mail. The transgressive nature of biography is rarely acknowledged, but it is the only explanation for biography’s status as a popular genre. The reader’s amazing tolerance (which he would extend to no novel written half as badly as most biographies) makes sense only when seen as a kind of collusion between him and the biographer in an excitingly forbidden undertaking: tiptoeing down the corridor together, to stand in front of the bedroom door and try to peep through the keyhole. (qtd. in Lee, *Introduction* 95)

The image Malcolm draws is very memorable. The biographer appears as looting burglar who intrudes upon the private sphere of the famous writer. However, his voyeurism and ‘rifling through the drawers’ is condoned by academic scholarship which offers a legitimate status to the biographer’s work. Moreover, it puts the biographer in the position of a benefactor who ‘suffers’ hardships to provide the public with the ‘truth’ about his subject. The biography

³¹ Edmund Curll wrote an innumerable amount of biographical pamphlets (see, Holmes 17; Lee, *Introduction* 95).

is presented as literary experience which takes readers right into the story and squelches their voyeuristic desires, and this in turn reinforces the 'pact' between readers and biographer. These issues, which are highlighted by Janet Malcolm, are also criticised (to degrees) by Byatt, Barnes and Ackroyd.

In *Possession*, readers are presented with two different images of the biographer. One shows us the biographer as 'naturalist' who wants to protect his subject and aims all his efforts at presenting as 'whole' a picture as possible:

This man went out with a pouch and gathered up owl-pellets, which he labelled, and later, took apart with forceps, bathed in glass beakers of various cleansing fluids, ordering and rearranging the orts and fragments of the owl's compressed package of bone, tooth and fur, in order to reconstitute the dead shrew or slow-worm which had run, died and made its way through owl-gut. (*Possession* 29)

Professor Blackadder, Dr Beatrice Nest, Roland Michell and Dr Maud Bailey fall into the category of the 'naturalist', and try to 'capture' the truth about their respective subjects (Randolph Henry Ash, Ellen Ash and Christabel LaMotte) by mainly analysing their literary output. They emphasise the texts which were produced by their subjects.

The other image – the biographer as a destructive being who chips away at the biographee – highlights the negative effects of the biographer's excavation as damaging to the subject's entity:

The cliffs themselves are grey and flaking. [...] There was a notice: please do not damage the cliffs; respect our heritage and preserve it for all of us. [...] A young man with a hammer and a sack was nevertheless busy chipping away at the rock-face, from which coiled and rimmed circular forms protruded everywhere. (*Possession* 269)

According to Jon Stallworthy (32), A. S. Byatt "reserves her fiercest satire for the American – and it is significant that he *is* American – academic biographer", Professor Mortimer P. Cropper (Mort for Short). Her portrayal of the American biographer is even more disturbing than Henry James' in *The Aspern Papers*. Cropper's first appearance in the narrative already marks him as the villain of the novel:

He wore a long black silk dressing-gown, with crimson revers, over black silk pyjamas, crimson-piped, with a monogram on his breast-pocket. His slippers mole-black velvet, were embroidered in gold thread with a female head surrounded by shooting rays or shaken hair. [...] His face in the mirror was fine and precise, his silver hair most exquisitely and severely cut, his half-glasses gold-rimmed, his mouth pursed, but pursed in American [...] His body was long and lean and trim; he had American hips, ready for a neat belt and the faraway ghost of a gunbelt. (*Possession* 93)

Cropper's appearance makes one think of the villain in a Victorian melodrama. He is characterised as cunning and ruthless, always bent on promoting Ash scholarship (Stallworthy 32). He developed his 'black box', with which he is able to make clandestine copies of documents, in case the owner of said documents does not approve of handing them over to Cropper. Of course, everything happens to further the cause of academic scholarship:

He was adept at acquiring invitations into the most unlikely houses where some relic of Ash's hand might be found; once there he had come to the conclusion that it was necessary to make some record, privately, for himself, of what he found, in case the owner subsequently proved reluctant to sell or even to allow copies to be made, as had been known, once or twice, most detrimentally to the cause of scholarship. There were cases where his clandestine pictures were the only record, anywhere in the world, of documents that had vanished without trace. (*Possession* 94)

Cropper always assures his 'victims' that only he is able to provide the best possible conditions for any textual or material legacy left by Ash. Letters or artefacts "will be preserved forever in the finest conditions and purified air, controlled temperature and limited access, only to accredited scholars in the field" (*Possession* 97) in the Stant Collection at Robert Dale Owen University, of which he is the Chairman. Cropper is a very clever man and brilliant speaker who knows how to use his connections and his money to his advantage, so that anything relating to Ash will find its way (sooner or later) to the United States. This makes him the prime rival of Professor Blackadder who tries his hardest at keeping Ash's legacy on British soil.

Mortimer Cropper is obsessed with Randolph Henry Ash. He indulges in "celebrity fetishism" (Schlaeger 57) when he acquires Ash's artefacts for

personal use, as he did with Ash's golden watch or his signet ring. He collects (and tries to purchase) everything that relates to his 'idol'. He has written *The Great Ventriloquist* – Ash's biography – of which Maud is very sceptical as she perceives "something terrible about Cropper's imagination from all this. He had a peculiarly vicious version of reverse hagiography; the desire to cut his subject down to size" (*Possession* 250). Instead of presenting readers with an objective account of Ash in *The Great Ventriloquist*, he constantly assesses and makes judgements (that go too far) about his subject. Cropper writes himself into Ash's biography. The contrary happens in Cropper's attempt at an autobiography. There, he constantly refers to Randolph Henry Ash and the Robert Dale Owen University, of which he is the proud Chairman. Cropper comes from a family of 'treasure-hunters' and continued, so to speak, his 'family business'. However, his autobiography reveals nothing of deeper meaning about himself; his whole focus is on the objects which are in his possession, and the articles which he has written about Ash. Yet, he does realise that his "passion was for the past" (*Possession* 101).

Readers come to understand that Cropper's obsession with Ash is an act of substitution. He says about himself: "He tended his body, the outward man, with fastidiousness that he would have bestowed on the inner man too, if he had known who he was, if he did not feel the whole thing to be thickly veiled" (*Possession* 99). Cropper feels his own self to be 'thickly veiled'; he is unable to understand himself. As a consequence, he tries to compensate that by knowing everything there is to know about Randolph Henry Ash. Therefore, Mortimer Cropper takes it as a personal insult when he finds out that Ash and LaMotte 'concealed' their affair and its results – a child – from him. He swears, "*I intend to know*" (*Possession* 428). His desire to know 'everything' about Ash, leads him to dig up the box of letters which Ellen Ash buried with her husband. Mortimer Cropper, the driven, obsessed biographer literally turns into the 'post-mortem exploiter' Henry James (and Ellen Ash) feared and tried to divert.

In Byatt's *Possession*, Mortimer Cropper is obsessed with his subject. He collects memorabilia and follows in his black Mercedes Ash's movements through various countries. Moreover, he is interested in possessing Ash's

correspondence in order to 'preserve' it at the Robert Dale Owen University, where he has the power over all the artefacts. Artefacts also play an important role in Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*. Geoffrey Braithwaite reflects, while visiting cultural heritage sites that focus on Gustave Flaubert, "What makes us randy for relics? Don't we believe the words enough? Do we think the leavings of a life contain some ancillary truth?" (*FP* 12) According to James B. Scott, Geoffrey Braithwaite's quest to find the 'authentic' stuffed parrot that modelled for Loulou mirrors "the human compulsion to grasp at artifacts [sic] and to use these as signifying ends in themselves, because of a reluctance or fear to see the artifact [sic] as merely one component in an endless chain of meaning" (qtd. in Hateley 178). Consequently, the parrot can be understood as a metaphor for "the human need for tangible and coherent meaning" (Hateley 178), and it becomes a representation for Flaubert's life. Moreover, it presents "the apotheosis – as a tangible intersection between Flaubert's life and work" (Hateley 178).

Artefacts – like signet rings, gold watches, letters and parrots – are essential cornerstones of the heritage industry which manifests itself in the mushrooming of museums, country houses, and other forms of heritage sites that focus on an 'idealised' past (Su 684). John J. Su (684) explains Robert Hewison's argument which states that the 'heritage industry' does not preserve the past, but rather "stifles the possibility for creative change by establishing an idealized past as the model for what Great Britain³² should be". However, artefacts and memorabilia do not only set up imprisoning walls (see Su 685), but also "limit the possible scope of interpretations" (Su 704). The historian Edith Wyschogrod has established the theory of 'non-events'³³: As we believe that it is impossible to recover the "absolute truth" about the past, non-events make it possible to authorise a kind of certainty. This implies that "the sum of collected material traces³⁴ available at a given moment establishes a set of basic boundaries for possible interpretations, and any historical reconstruction that fails to account for these traces can be negated or eliminated" (Su 704). Consequently, credible reconstructions of the past become limited. However, historical error is still

³² Of course, this applies to any country that focuses on establishing a heritage industry which provides important touristic attractions.

³³ See Su 704, footnote 13.

³⁴ Such as letters, diaries, paintings, witness-testimonies, manuscripts and other memorabilia (see Su 703).

probable. In the case of Byatt's *Possession*, the lock of fair hair the scholars find in Ash's grave is erroneously attributed to Christabel LaMotte, because the scholars do not know of Ash's meeting with his daughter Maia.

In *Possession*, Professor Mortimer Cropper is the perfect example of a biographer obsessed with the 'possession' of his subject. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Geoffrey Braithwaite hopes to escape his past by trying to find the 'authentic' parrot. However, in *Chatterton*, one notices a different kind of 'possession': the past haunts the present by recurring re-enactments of the past, as well as by "[rearticulating] voices from the past" (Finney 245).

Chatterton's death scene is 'rehearsed' in all three time periods, several times. First, it is Charles who "feigned death and fell across the sofa, with one arm trailing upon the carpet" (*Chatterton* 15). Charles is not slipping into the role of the 'real', 'authentic' Chatterton who died a horrible death due to arsenic, but he re-enacts the romantic scene which was immortalised by Henry Wallis in his *Death of Chatterton*. Next, Henry Wallis himself rehearses George Meredith's part as Chatterton. He tells Meredith, "The better I impersonate you, dear George, the better I paint you" (*Chatterton* 137). By immersing himself in the role, he acquires a 'feeling' for the scene which he will convey onto the canvas. The death scene is again 'played' by Charles when he dies, and finally comes "Ackroyd's own imaginative reconstruction of Chatterton's death" (Finney 256). David Lodge criticised Ackroyd for using "his authority as a story-teller to decide the historically undecidable mystery of Chatterton's death" (qtd. in Finney 256). However, Brian Finney (256) points out that "the whole point of this novel is to assert the supremacy of the verbal imagination over the irretrievable world of facts." The past is forever irrecoverable but words continue to exist.

Moreover, Ackroyd's *Chatterton* can be understood as a celebration of the "dissolution of the distinctions between authenticity and forgery, originality and imitation, reality and its representation in art" (Finney 256). The novel is haunted by voices of the (real or fictional) past. Chatterton explains this in his 'autobiography' (which is forged):

"[...] and when I wrote out their words, copying [sic] the very spelling of the Originals, it was as if I had become one of those Dead and

could speak with them also. I was brought to such a Pitch that, when I left off transcribing, I found that I could continue in my own right; [...] I decided to shore up these ancient Fragments with my own genius: thus the Living and the Dead were to be reunited.” (*Chatterton* 85)

Chatterton is possessed by the words of the past, and by transcribing them, he slowly makes them his own, until he can express himself in the voice of the past. Harriet Scrope, Charles Wychwood and Philip Slack mirror Chatterton, and base their artistic expressions on the works and words of others. Even Henry Wallis uses a ‘model’ as starting point for his pictorial representation of Chatterton. Ackroyd’s novel *Chatterton* aims to make us aware that “we all appropriate the past for our own purposes and in our own ways” (Finney 250). As a consequence, there is no ‘objective’ past, or – in *Chatterton*’s case – the discoverable figure of Thomas Chatterton. Ackroyd deconstructs the image the Romantics created of Chatterton: Wordsworth called him “marvellous boy”, Coleridge “spirit blest” and Keats “child of sorrow”. However, their ‘image’ of Thomas Chatterton was based on his texts, which turned out to be forgeries (see Finney 250). This highlights that the past and the biographical representation of a historical person is unrecoverable. ‘Immortality’ can only be granted through artistic expression because the poet or artist disappears into his own text or work of art (Finney 249-250).

Peter Ackroyd himself said, “The history of English literature is really the history of plagiarism” (qtd. in Finney 245). According to Brian Finney (246), Peter Ackroyd refuses “to distinguish between the genres of biography and fiction.” In *Chatterton*, he deconstructs “concepts like originality, authenticity, and objectivity [and replaces them] by the iridescent surface of language and its endless reformation in the works of the great wordsmiths of literature” (Finney 246). Ackroyd states his own opinion when he lets his characters read, “Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before” (*Chatterton* 58). Ackroyd wants to expose “the false value that the world attaches to originality and authenticity” (Finney 255). The past cannot be recovered, however, “the world and its past are constructed within language” (Finney 258). As a consequence, the past becomes a series of

texts which interact with one another, so that the past 'haunts' the present, and the present influences the past (see Finney 258). 'Immortality' is therefore to be found in "the free play of art, the web of language" (Finney 258).

The quest for knowledge has a transformative power in *Possession*, whereas the search for the 'true' identity of Flaubert's stuffed parrot does not provide "resolution, escape, [or] consolation, but at least it forces an acknowledgement of one's inner reality" (Janik 171). Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* on the other hand, emphasises the multiple intersections of past and present, so that the past can be understood as a "continuity of experience" (Janik 174). This is highlighted by Philip Slack who explains to Edward Wychwood why a field is green *and* yellow: "Some parts of the grass are living, and some parts are dead. But they're all parts of the same field." (*Chatterton* 211)

3.4. Uncovering Literary Legacies

Richard Holmes points towards the fact that biographers have to address the question of authenticity regarding their sources. They base their reconstruction of the biographee on textual (and oral) evidence that is "inherently unreliable" (Holmes 17). Witness-testimonies are not trustworthy as memory itself is erroneous. Moreover, memoirs are biased as they present the viewpoint of its writers; letters are always addressed towards a particular addressee; and "even private diaries and intimate journals have to be recognized as literary forms of self-invention rather than an 'ultimate' truth of private fact or feeling" (Holmes 17). Consequently, the biographer has to create a 'factual', 'objective' and 'authentic' account of a person's life out of fictional elements.

Literary legacies such as letters and journals form an essential part of the narrative in A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and help to undermine the modern 'biography industry' which puts so much trust into textual evidence. In *Possession*, letters are written, sent, read, lost, hidden, found, copied, edited, annotated, sold and bought, burnt, buried and dug up. The novel is an epistolary tour de force that reminds the reader of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Two unfinished letters by Randolph Ash to an unidentified woman

initiate a complex quest to solve a literary mystery. According to Lucile Desblache (91), these unfinished letters become “a recurrent motif and symbol of obsession of the scholars’ burning needs to appropriate discovery.” Following the steps of Roland Michell and Dr Maud Bailey (who in turn follow the movements of the Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte), the reader is “transformed into a voyeur, peering into a message which is not addressed to him or her” (Desblache 91). This intrusive feeling is shared by Roland who comments, “He felt as though he was prying, and as though he was being uselessly urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity – not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge” (*Possession* 82). The different characters in *Possession* – Roland, Maud, Professor Mortimer Cropper, Professor James Blackadder, and Dr Beatrice Nest – are all obsessed to various degrees with the past. On the one hand they are driven by their personal curiosity; on the other hand they legitimise their ruthless ambition with the academic interest in the textual output of the Victorians (see Desblache 92).

Biofictions like *Possession*, *Chatterton*, and *Flaubert’s Parrot* like to undermine the biography industry’s pretence at an objective representation of the subject. They point out that literary legacies can be manipulated, forged, and misinterpreted. Consequently, an unbiased biographical reconstruction based on such textual (or oral) documents is impossible. A striking example for the misconstruing effects of diaries is Ellen Ash’s journal in *Possession*. Professor Blackadder, for instance, criticises it for being dull, predictable and full of Victorian domesticity. However, Dr Beatrice Nest who edits Ellen Ash’s journal and correspondence suggests that the journal was written with the deliberate intention “to baffle” (*Possession* 220). She explains her theory:

When I started on it, I thought, what a nice dull woman. And then I got the sense of things flittering and flickering behind all that solid – oh, I think of it as *panelling*. And then I got to think – I was being led on – to imagine the flittering flickering things – and that really it was all just as stolid and dull as anything. I thought I was making it all up, that she could have said something interesting – how shall I put it – intriguing – once in a while – but she *absolutely wasn’t going to*. (*Possession* 220)

Beatrice's theory suggests that Ellen Ash was aware of a potential readership and anticipated someone 'rifling through her papers'. Her diary is exposed as a fictional construct based on careful selection and omission, in which she "writes herself as the ideal embodiment of Victorian femininity" (Shiffman 96). She subtly subverts the cultural ideology of the different spheres of men and women, and deconstructs it (see Shiffman 96). Ellen Ash's journal exposes diaries as textual constructs which can be devised like any other fiction. Adrienne Shiffman (95) remarks that it blurs the "boundaries between diarist and author, ordinary and extraordinary, private and public, [...] and the female diarist ultimately emerges as a powerful literary talent."

Moreover, Ellen Ash's journal functions as a 'veil' between her husband, the poet Randolph Henry Ash, and the future biographers she anticipated. As Beatrice Nest reveals,

I think she knew it might be read. There are several sharp comments in it about contemporary biographical habits – rummaging in Dickens's desk before he was fairly buried [...] She knew he was a great poet and she must have known they would come – the scavengers – sooner or later if she didn't burn it. *And she didn't burn it.* (Possession 219, my emphasis)

Immediately before his death, Ash asked his wife to "[b]urn what they should not see" (*Possession* 442), so that the myth of their perfect marriage would be preserved. However, Ellen undermines his attempt as she leaves clues in her journal which enable the questing scholars to piece the 'truth' together. When Ellen Ash writes in her journal, "~~Despite all~~ We have been so happy in our life together, even our separations contribute to the trust and deep affection that is between us" (*Possession* 229), she leaves behind a "lingering qualification [which] exists in a state of liminality; simultaneously included and omitted, it hovers between presence and absence" (Shiffman 99). The crossed out words make readers doubt her assessments. Moreover, Ellen does not burn Christabel LaMotte's letter which provides the final explanation (for the scholars; we readers receive more information in the postscript):

I have made a fire here, and burned some things. I shall burn more. He shall not be picked by vultures.

There are things I cannot burn. Nor ever I think look at again. There are things here that are not mine, that I could not be a party to burning. And there are our dear letters, from all those foolish years of separation. What can I do? I cannot leave them to be buried with me. Trust may be betrayed. I shall lay these things to rest with him now, to await my coming. Let the earth take them. (*Possession* 443)

Adrienne Shiffman (101) points out that “Ellen does not prevent the attack of the “vultures” but simply delays it.” Moreover, she provides Cropper and the others with the exact location of the letter which is the missing link in their quest. Additionally, she reflects that she wanted to give the truth a chance by giving the buried letters “a *sort of duration*” and a “demi-eternity”, so that “justice will perhaps be done to *her* when I am not here to see it” (*Possession* 462).

Ellen Ash “manufacture[d] the carefully edited, the carefully *strained* [...] truth of her journal” (*Possession* 461-462). It shows documentary evidence to be unreliable (Hansson 363) and to “be forever incomplete” (Hansson 365). Letters, journals, and autobiographical writings are textual constructs which are determined by processes of selection and omission, and reflect the writer’s awareness of a possible readership. In A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*, but also in Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* (the ‘Chatterton papers’) and Julian Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot* (the correspondence between Flaubert and his fiancée Juliet Herbert), the reader is made aware of the ‘dangers’ of previously undiscovered materials to long-established academic theories. However, there is the possibility that these documents are red herrings which were forged or written with the intention ‘to baffle’ so that future biographers and scholars were led off track. These textual constructs could misconstrue future academic research. The ‘safest’ way for the biographee to escape his biographer is for him or her to ‘burn what they should not see’, as the burned documents will be forever lost to academic research and the heritage industry. It is interesting to speculate how future biographers will ‘excavate’ textual evidence. Perhaps they will dig up facebook accounts from the depths of cyberspace?

3.5. The Biographer's Quest as Journey of Self-Discovery

Postmodern biofictions like A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* are considered examples of historiographic metafiction. The novels blur the generic boundary lines between fact and fiction. Historical truths are presented as if they were invented, and fictional events and characters are depicted as if they were real. This postmodern blurring of genre boundaries highlights the constructedness of representations of history, the past and biographical accounts. The novels make us aware that historiography is a human construct that employs narrative techniques to capture the past. As a consequence, it is impossible to grasp the 'real' past or the 'truth' about a person. Moreover, Byatt, Barnes and Ackroyd criticise biography because its conventional, conservative form pretends to represent an 'authentic' picture of the biographical subject. In order to bring this fact to the attention of the reader, they shift the focus from a 'complete' depiction of the subject towards a representation of the biographer, scholar, poet or amateur-sleuth in search of the 'truth' about his subject. This quest illustrates the constructedness of the past by accentuating the biographer's method of selection and manipulation. Moreover, the (fictional) biographer himself begins to realise that he is at the mercy of outside factors such as contingency. The biographer's inability to 'capture' the 'reality' and 'truth' about his subject, leads him to analyse his own attitude towards the past, his 'art' and life in general. The quest for his subject has turned out to be a quest for his own self.

3.5.1. *Possession*: Roland Michell and Maud Bailey

Byatt's *Possession* can be understood as a *Bildungsroman* as the two main characters, Roland Michell and Dr Maud Bailey, are both transformed by their quest to find out the truth behind the relationship between the Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. Ann Marie Adams has observed that most scholars agree with Bo Lunden who states that the novel's intention is to "re-educate" Roland and Maud, "moving them toward the reading practices

advocated at the close of the narrative” (Adams 108). Although many references to that end can be found throughout the novel, Adams (108) argues that

the novel’s contradictory representation of its central characters’ critical methodologies is the primary force behind the narrative “seduction” [...], because this ambiguity obscures the ways in which Roland and Maud (and the “actual” reader who necessarily follows the textual clues disclosed by the fictional critics) are constructed (and constrained) as “enchanted readers” from the beginning.

The quest for the truth about Randolph Henry Ash’s and Christabel LaMotte’s connection turns out to be a journey of development for Roland and Maud. Not only is their outlook on life, love and critical reading altered, but their futures and career prospects also change for the better.

Roland Michell is a part-time research assistant to Professor Blackadder, the editor of Randolph Ash’s *Complete Works*. His situation looks grim: His academic career is unsuccessful as he lost a job opportunity to Fergus Wolff who “was also in the right field, which was literary theory” (*Possession* 14). Moreover, he is financially dependent on his girlfriend Val. Their long-standing relationship has become stale, which finds its metaphorical embodiment in their damp apartment. Roland sees himself as a textual scholar who focuses on primary texts to investigate textual clues, and does not base his research on reading secondary literature (with the exception of Cropper’s biography of Ash).

Ann Marie Adams quotes Elisabeth Bronfen who noted that Roland’s “old-fashioned scholarship, the decoding of citational references in Ashs [sic] poetry, lets him fail in the midst of an academic landscape interested almost exclusively in modish theoretical brilliance” (qtd. in Adams 111). Roland’s fortuitous discovery of two letters written by Ash to an unknown woman, later identified as the poetess Christabel LaMotte, provoke him to impulsively ‘steal’ them. The letters set off a treasure hunt to find out the secret behind the two poets’ relationship in which Dr Maud Bailey joins him.

Maud is quite the opposite of Roland: fair-haired where he is dark; a successful feminist scholar specialised in Christabel LaMotte, from an upper-class family

related to the poetess. Although Maud presents herself as a sophisticated woman, it seems that she is at war with her own femininity which finds expression in the way she is always covering up her hair. Moreover, she appears insecure – afraid even – of human relationships. Both, Roland and Maud long for the whiteness of a “clean empty bed in a clean empty room, where nothing is asked or to be asked” (*Possession* 267).

Roland Michell and Dr Maud Bailey are both theoretically well-versed critics who are familiar with all the different approaches to literature. At the beginning of chapter two we are informed that Roland is “trained in the post-structuralist deconstruction of the subject” (9); and later we learn that Maud is a feminist, Lacanian scholar. Again and again they demonstrate their intimate knowledge of theories, for instance, when Maud contemplates, “Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, [...], who am I? A matrix for a susurrations of texts and codes? It was both a pleasant and an unpleasant idea, this requirement that she think of herself as intermittent and partial” (*Possession* 251).

Byatt remarked in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel that “the poor moderns are always asking themselves so many questions about whether their actions are real and whether what they say can be thought to be true [...] that they become papery and are miserably aware of this” (qtd. in Adams 112). Adams explains that the narrative suggests that “the contemporary characters are necessarily less ‘real’ than their Victorian predecessors [...] because their cultural beliefs deny them a sense of autonomy and individuality.

Critics often discuss the character’s development separately, but it is obvious that their joint journey triggers their change. Roland and Maud need each other – intellectually, physically and metaphorically – in order to trace the steps of the Victorian poets and function as their mirror images in the 20th century. The re-enactment of the Victorian poets’ exploration of the Yorkshire countryside not only provides textual evidence that the poets were there together, but it also opens up their minds to new possibilities so that they may look at themselves and the world around them with different eyes. Maud, one time, contemplates how their contemporary concepts of the world differ from the Victorians,

We are very knowing. We know all sorts of other things, too – about how there isn't a unitary ego – how we're made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things – and I suppose we *believe* that? We know we are driven by desire, but we can't see it as they did, can we? We never say the word Love, do we – we know it's a suspect ideological construct – especially Romantic Love – so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things – Love – themselves – that what they did mattered – (*Possession* 267)

Maud becomes more and more suspicious of the contemporary theories that build up her world picture. She starts to question the very theoretical constructs on which she based her academic career. However, as Adams critically points out, the reader does not really *know* if her thinking has changed since the narrative only *suggests* but does not *demonstrate* this (see Adams 116).

Yet, her inner transformation can be seen in her actions. During her stay at the North Yorkshire coast she begins to open up to Roland. An important image of her inner development is the loosening of her hair in front of Roland:

'It has a right to breathe.' And indeed his [Roland's] feeling was for the hair, a kind of captive creature. Maud pulled out a pin or two and the mass slipped, and then hung, still plaited, unbalanced on her neck. [...] She began slowly to undo, with unweaving fingers, the long, thick braids. Roland watched intently. [...] And then she put down her head and shook it from side to side, and the heavy hair flew up, and the air got into it. Her long neck bowed, she shook her head faster and faster, and Roland saw the light rush towards it and glitter on it, [...] Roland felt as though something had been loosed in himself, that had been gripping him. (272)

The unfurling of the hair is a very sexual image. This is especially significant as Maud is afraid of male possession. When she thinks of Fergus Wolff, her ex-lover, the image of an unmade bed comes to her mind. It can be concluded that the picture of the unmade bed symbolises the unhinging of her inner balance. However, the journey with Roland, the secret of Ash's and LaMotte's letters that they share, brings her closer to Roland and she learns to trust him. Moreover, Roland does not pose a threat to her self-possession and her autonomy – like Fergus Wolff did – because in order to find peace of mind they both imagine themselves to be in a white empty bed in a white empty room (see *Possession*

267). Additionally, the comparison of her hair to a 'captive creature' which she lets loose is the symbol of her inner self being able to cope with (some kind of) intimacy. Furthermore, she opens herself up to a different world-picture, namely that of the Victorians who were able to face love with courage and an open mind. After their secret – the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte is discovered by the other scholars - their trust and dependence on each other makes them run away together to Brittany where they slip into the behaviour of an old married couple.

Roland's quest to solve the literary mystery of Ash and LaMotte brings about an epiphany: Roland sheds the "constraints of rigid scholarship [and] is no longer concerned with hydra-like footnotes that engulf the text and agonizing over what cannot be included in a scholarly edition" (Adams 110-111). Due to this quest he finds his own voice. He is now "concerned with how poetry and poetic language can be produced" (Adams 111): "He [Roland] was writing lists of words that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory. He had hopes [...] of writing poems, but so far had got no further than lists" (*Possession* 431). Moreover, when Roland re-reads Ash's *The Golden Apples* (which is a narrative loop as this was the work he was annotating when he found Ash's letters; see Adams 109) his reading experience has changed: "He heard Ash's voice, certainly his voice, his own unmistakable, voice, and he heard the language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single human, writer or reader" (*Possession* 472). This is his epiphany and

he began to think of words, words came from some well in him, lists of words that arranged themselves into poems, 'The Death Mask', 'The Fairfax Wall', 'A Number of Cats'. He could hear, or feel, or even almost see, the patterns made by a voice he didn't yet know, but which was his own. (*Possession* 475)

While Roland's epiphany brings about a creative change, "Maud's 'reward' involves a valorization of the creative, but her 'reward' is an inheritance, not an inspiration" (Adams 118). The scholars discover that Maud is the direct descendant of Ash's and LaMotte's love child, Maia, who was raised by LaMotte's sister as if the child was her own. After the letter which reveals the truth has been read, Professor Blackadder comments, "How strange for you,

Maud, to turn out to be descended from both – how strangely appropriate to have been exploring all along the myth – no the truth – of your own origins.” (*Possession* 503) The quest to discover the secret of Ash’s and LaMotte’s relationship leads her to find out the truth about her own family. By tracing the steps of the Victorian poets, she uncovers her own roots. Looking at a photograph of Maia, Maud recognises that in her face can be seen traces of Ash’s and LaMotte’s facial features. Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash are not only immortalised by their poetry, but they also live on in their descendant – Maud.

3.5.2. *Chatterton*: Harriet Scrope and Philip Slack

Charles Wychwood is an unsuccessful poet who discovers the portrait of a middle-aged man in a London antiques shop. He is fascinated by the picture and wants to investigate the identity of the man portrayed. It is his friend Philip Slack who identifies the man as the romantic forger-poet Thomas Chatterton because the facial features remind him of Henry Wallis’ *Death of Chatterton*. Charles returns to the antiques shop and is given the address of the previous owner. Together with Philip, he travels to Bristol – the town where Chatterton was born – to find out more. There, he receives a bag full of papers which turn out to be the ‘autobiography’ of Thomas Chatterton. According to this manuscript Chatterton forged his own death at the age of seventeen, and continued writing under pennames such as William Blake. If the papers were authentic, this discovery would destroy long-established academic theories. Charles, the unpublished poet, envisions a bright future in the academic field: “in his imagination, he had solved the secret of Thomas Chatterton and was enjoying the admiration of the world” (*Chatterton* 60).

However, the more Charles engages in his quest to solve the mystery of Chatterton, the more he loses his grip on reality. At the very beginning of the narrative, he seems playful, child-like and prone to daydreaming. However, one gets the distinct impression that Charles’ exuberant behaviour is a cover-up for his disappointment of having been unable to publish his poems, and it seems to hide his worry about some strange illness which afflicts him: he starts

hallucinating, suffers from headaches, his vision becomes impaired, and he sometimes loses the ability to form sentences. His preoccupation with the mysterious portrait and the 'Chatterton manuscript' depletes his whole energy: he can concentrate only for a short time, and, to the disappointment of his wife Vivien, he neglects his own poetry. He pours all his enthusiasm into writing a preface to the 'Chatterton papers'. Only after his death, the illness is explained: Charles had a brain tumour. However, according to Del Ivan Janik (173), the mysterious portrait stands in direct relation to Charles Wychwood's illness and subsequent death as it "gradually drains the life from him and, after his death, destroys itself."

Charles Wychwood's desire to solve the mystery of the portrait and his enthusiasm for the 'Chatterton manuscript' also affects his long-time friend Philip Slack, and his former employer, the aging novelist Harriet Scrope, who suffers from writer's block. Harriet Scrope shows such eccentric behaviour that even her friend, Sarah Tilt, observes that "age and relative fame had rendered Harriet less peaceful: the more she wrote, it seemed, the less coherent her personality became" (*Chatterton* 32). In order to get Harriet back on track, her publisher had suggested that she should write an autobiography. However, the concept of writing her memoirs puts her in a panic because "[i]f she told the truth, and described the real story of her life, if she revealed what even to herself she called her 'secret', there would be an outcry against her" (*Chatterton* 29).

Harriet is unable to write her autobiography as it would expose her secret: she is a plagiarist who based two of her novels on the work of the almost forgotten, Victorian writer, Harrison Bentley. As she faces the problem of devising her biography, she remembers Charles Wychwood who had worked as her assistant before, and asks him to become her ghost writer. While talking to her, Charles indicates that he is aware of her 'borrowing' from Harrison Bentley. However, Charles reacts very blasé about it and "considers [it] a perfectly natural act of literary appropriation" (Finney 253), and after a short panic attack, she calms down again. Her earlier comment, "Perhaps Mother is another Chatterton! Perhaps I go back thousands of years!" (*Chatterton* 99) was – for

once – her telling the truth. Actually, Harriet had only ‘adapted’ two works of Bentley: “The experience of employing a plot, even though it was the invention of some other writer, had liberated her imagination; and, from that time forward, all her novels were her own work” (*Chatterton* 103). Although she believes that she has been “a serious writer then, a proper writer: she had not known what she was trying to say” (*Chatterton* 103) while ‘borrowing’ from Bentley, she is afraid of being exposed as a plagiarist. She is proud of her ‘original’ work, and does not want her reputation to be tainted and suspicions raised against her books. As a consequence, “[a]nxious reflection had so nourished the problem that it seemed to encompass the whole of her past” (*Chatterton* 103). In her mind, she over-emphasises the ‘borrowing’, and as a consequence, she is unable to put things into perspective, and invents her past, or ‘enriches’ it by adding episodes from her own or someone else’s books.

However, the more she makes up her own life-story, the more she loses the ability to tell the difference between truth and fiction. Additionally, introspection becomes impossible for her as

something kept her back, making her attention swerve away from herself and accelerate in a different direction. She could penetrate a little way into herself but then the procedure went into reverse and she was forced upwards again into the world: the experience was like that of falling. (*Chatterton* 29)

Conceiving the fiction of her life helps her to suppress the ‘other’ memories, and this can be understood as an escape mechanism. Another method to avoid her own self is her role-playing: she assumes a whole new character with its own name, history, unique personality and quirks. She even adopts different accents depending on the ‘reality’ of the role. Immersing herself in this other character is her means of escaping her fears of being exposed as plagiarist. Moreover, the role-playing allows her to have new experiences, discover different perspectives on life, and find new ‘plots’ for her fiction.

Learning about the ‘Chatterton papers’ and recognising the opportunities they might create, Harriet is instantly keen on getting her hands on the manuscript, which results in some comic scenes. On the one hand she wants to re-create the fantastic feeling she had while ‘adapting’ Harrison Bentley, on the other

hand she has always been vexed that her works had never received the proper academic recognition. She hopes to change that by publishing the 'Chatterton manuscript'. In order to achieve this, she schemes to swindle Charles – and later his wife Vivien – out of the papers. After Charles' death, she comes into possession of the mysterious painting, as well as the Chatterton 'autobiography'. However, they do not bring her any luck as they both turn out to be fakes. Although Harriet tries to have the painting changed into 'the real thing' by a master forger, it destroys itself. Additionally, when Philip asks her to give back the papers, she does not put up a fight. The whole 'Chatterton business' has tired her out: "And suddenly she felt very tired, tired of Chatterton and tired of herself for pursuing him" (*Chatterton* 208). Harriet Scrope comes to realise that it was "the element of mystery which had appealed to her. Now that everything had been explained, she was losing interest. She always preferred stories in which the ending had never been understood." (*Chatterton* 208)

Harriet Scrope wanted to re-create the emotions and excitement she had felt while 'adapting' Harrison Bentley's works. Her own "originality had begun to bore her" (*Chatterton* 103), and the quest to solve the mystery of the 'Chatterton papers' is a welcome distraction to her. Not only could she escape writing her autobiography, she could also gain academic recognition by presenting the papers to the world. However, Harriet Scrope realises that the search for Chatterton drains her of her energy: She is getting old, and by chasing Chatterton she only focuses on the past. She reflects, "She would soon be joining Chatterton under the ground, so why try to find him now? Why should she concern herself with the dead when she could see the living all around her?" (*Chatterton* 208). Harriet Scrope comes to understand that she wants to focus her attention on the living and not on the dead, who had had their chance at artistic expression. Now is her time.

Philip Slack, on the other hand, finds his courage and artistic expression, by following and observing his friend, Charles Wychwood. They have been friends since their days at university, for fifteen years, and once a week they dine together. The Wychwoods are extremely important to Philip as he regards them as his family. Therefore, he is afraid to admit – even to himself – that he is in

love with his friend's wife, Vivien: "He admired Vivien; he admired her for 'saving' Charles, as he often put it to himself" (*Chatterton* 18). Moreover, Philip compares himself to Charles, and finds himself lacking: Charles is the 'true' artist, a poet, who does not give up on his dreams, while he himself is a talentless would-be novelist who gave up on writing novels and became a public librarian.

It is Philip who identifies the man in Charles' portrait as Chatterton, as the man reminds him of Wallis' *Death of Chatterton*. In the library he searches the shelves for references about Chatterton, when he finds out by chance – putting his "trust in the principle of *sortes Vergilianae*" (*Chatterton* 68) – that Harriet Scrope had plagiarised Harrison Bentley's work. However, Philip does not feel like criticising her, as he can relate to her. He experienced the 'anxiety of influence' firsthand:

He had once attempted to write a novel but he had abandoned it after some forty pages: not only had he written with painful slowness and uncertainty, but even the pages he had managed to complete seemed to him to be filled with images and phrases from the work of other writers whom he admired. It had become a patchwork of other voices and other styles, and it was the overwhelming difficulty of recognising his own voice among them that had led him to abandon the project." (*Chatterton* 70)

Reading up on Chatterton, he falls asleep and has a bizarre dream, where Harriet Scrope watches him, and from behind her emerges Harrison Bentley. After waking up, he feels disoriented and disconnected from reality. The rows of books in the basement of the library suddenly seem threatening, as if the books would provide the entry to a world where only words existed:

There were pools of light among the stacks, directly beneath the bulbs which Philip had switched on, but it was now with an unexpected fearfulness that he saw how the books stretched away into the darkness. They seemed to expand as soon as they reached the shadows, creating some dark world where there was no beginning and no end, no story, no meaning. And, if you crossed the threshold into that world, you would be surrounded by words; you would crush them beneath your feet, you would knock against them with your head and arms, but if you tried to grasp them they would melt away. (*Chatterton* 71)

Philip 'sees' the possibilities books create as they contain whole 'realities' which exist on their own, independent from their 'creator'. The dream-like vision is also an embodiment of his own fear: to be unable to create a world of words.

After Charles' death, Philip changes drastically: he becomes more active and self-assured because he knows that two people – Charles' wife and son, Vivien and Edward – depend on him. He wants to protect them, and distract them from their grief. As a consequence, he buys a car especially for them, so that they can 'go for a spin' in the countryside. Vivien informs him that the gallery owner she works for has identified the portrait as a fake. This strengthens Philip's resolve to find out the truth about Charles' 'Chatterton papers' and he follows Charles' trail to Bristol. There he finds out that the manuscript is a fake:

The memoir had been forged by a bookseller who wanted to repay [Chatterton] in kind, to fake the work of a faker and so confuse for ever [sic] the memory of Chatterton; he would no longer be the poet who died young and glorious, but a middle-aged hack who continued a sordid trade with his partner. (*Chatterton* 221)

Philip envisions the damage the forged papers could do not only to the reputation of Chatterton, but also to Charles' legacy as he had firmly believed in the truth of these papers. However, Harriet Scrope hands over the papers without much fight, and Philip sends them back to the rightful owner who had never meant them to be shown to anyone. Moreover, Philip comes to realise that "the idea of Chatterton which Charles had created" (*Chatterton* 231) does not need to be forgotten. It does not matter that both the mysterious painting and the 'autobiography' were forgeries; essential are the feelings which Charles invested into the story of a Chatterton who had forged his own death. Philip tells Vivien, "The important thing is what Charles imagined, and we can keep hold of that. That isn't an illusion. The imagination never dies." (*Chatterton* 232)

Philip Slack believes that with Charles' idea as a 'guide', he can find his own literary voice and tell Charles' story. He explains to Vivien,

So I tried writing my own novel but it didn't work, you know. I kept on imitating other people. I had no real story, either, but now – [...] with this – with Charles's theory – I might be able to – [...] Of course, [...] I

must tell it in my own way. How Chatterton might have lived on.
(*Chatterton* 232)

Charles' idea of Chatterton's forged death becomes the starting point for Philip Slack's creativity. As a consequence, his work will relate to Wallis' *Death of Chatterton*, Harriet Scrope's 'borrowing' from Harrison Bentley's novels, or even Chatterton's adaptation of some original, medieval manuscripts. They all 'adapt' another's idea for their own purpose, and in doing so, by 'translating' it with the faculty of their minds, they make it their own. According to Brian Finney (250), in each case "the subject disappears into the work of art." Chatterton disappears into the 'Rowley sequence', Wallis into his own painting, and Charles into his idea of Chatterton's forged death. However, while they might 'disappear', on another level they are given 'immortality' by the ones who use their artistic output as a starting point for their own work. As a consequence, Chatterton and Meredith are given life through Wallis' *Death of Chatterton*, Harrison Bentley and Charles live on in the works of Harriet Scrope and Philip Slack. As Brian Finney (246) points out, Peter Ackroyd creates in *Chatterton* a "linguistically constituted universe in which concepts like originality, authenticity, and objectivity dissolve, to be replaced by the iridescent surface of language and its endless reformation in the works of the great wordsmiths of literature."

3.5.3. *Flaubert's Parrot*: Geoffrey Braithwaite

Flaubert's Parrot is the embodiment of Geoffrey Braithwaite's struggle to write Gustave Flaubert's biography. Braithwaite, a retired doctor, is incapable of providing a coherent – conventional – life-story of the writer. Instead, the first-person narrator – Braithwaite – gives us an extremely detailed record of his meticulous research on Gustave Flaubert. However, it seems impossible for Braithwaite to conceive a 'complete' biography. As a result, Flaubert's biography becomes a story of replacements: the reader gets the history of the writer's statue in Rouen (which is not the original one), three chronologies that feature different aspects of Flaubert's life (facts, dates, anecdotes and Flaubert's expressions), a list of all the animals that came into contact with the French writer, and descriptions of the places where Flaubert was born, and where he died. Yet, when Braithwaite traces Flaubert's steps, he finds out by

chance that there are two parrots (one in Croisset, and one in the Hôtel-Dieu) that claim to be the model for the parrot Loulou in *Un Cœur simple*. This discovery compels Braithwaite to go on a quest to find the authentic parrot that posed for Loulou.

Reading *Flaubert's Parrot*, one gets the distinct impression that behind the obvious story – the constantly interrupted would-be biography of Flaubert and his quest for Loulou – hides another, darker tale which is related to Braithwaite's own life:

I thought of writing books myself once. I had the ideas; I even made notes. But I was a doctor, married with children. You can only do one thing well: Flaubert knew that. Being a doctor was what I did well. My wife ... died. My children are scattered now; they write whenever guilt impels. They have their own lives, naturally. 'Life! Life! To have erections!' I was reading that Flaubertian exclamation the other day.
(FP 13)

Already at the very beginning of the novel Braithwaite breaks the narrative to insert an autobiographical comment which is striking in its brevity. Facts are 'shot' at the reader in rapid succession. However, when Braithwaite mentions his wife – a pause ensues. Then he immediately switches his thoughts back to Flaubert. This is the first clue we get that there is a personal trauma hidden in Braithwaite's narrative that has to do with his wife. The Flaubertian exclamation: "Life! Life! To have erections!" (FP 13) may even be considered a hint to a part of Braithwaite's problem that involves his wife – sexuality. It takes Braithwaite a long time, and many excursions into the Flaubertian world, to address the 'real', 'pure' story, that of the adultery and suicide of his wife Ellen.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is a wound inflicted upon the psyche (see Caruth 3). It "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 11). She explains that trauma

is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot

be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth 4)

Reading *Flaubert's Parrot* in the light of trauma theory, we begin to understand that Braithwaite's biography of Flaubert is his escape mechanism. It is his means to cope with a traumatic experience which turns out to be not only his wife's suicide, but also his guilt: "I looked down at Ellen. She wasn't corrupted. Hers is a pure story. I switched her off" (*FP* 168). After her suicide attempt, she fell into a coma and he decided to switch off the machines that kept her alive.

Braithwaite's almost compulsive quest for facts about Flaubert and Loulou, and his repetitive retelling of the writer's life-story from different perspectives, is his means of coping with these traumas (Cox 53). In order to escape his own story, Braithwaite identifies himself with Flaubert and he seems especially attracted to the fact that the writer presented himself as solitary, withdrawn figure. However, as Emma Cox (54) explains, Barnes himself "has commented that the image of Flaubert's loneliness and abstinence from life was part of the writer's 'chosen self-image'". Therefore, "Braithwaite is in fact identifying not with Flaubert, but with Flaubert's constructed self-image" (Cox 54). Cox points out that "Braithwaite can never come to any insight into his own life by looking to, and identifying with, a historical figure. Yet, Geoffrey Braithwaite needs Flaubert: by repeatedly retelling Flaubert's story, by identifying with the 'safe' self-image of Flaubert (one that fits Braithwaite's current mental condition), he slowly comes to terms with what has happened in his personal life.

The reader becomes the witness and even plays the role of the therapist when Braithwaite finally tries to embark on the story which is the 'core' of his narrative. The reader is directly addressed and becomes the understanding ally who will patiently wait for Braithwaite to embark on the 'real' biography: "I've fetched myself another whisky; I hope you don't mind. Just getting braced to tell you about... what? about whom? Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself" (*FP* 85-86).

Braithwaite mentions that there are three stories 'contending' within him. He is perfectly aware that his preoccupation with Flaubert is an escape mechanism,

an attempt to drown the thoughts about Ellen which haunt *Flaubert's Parrot*. Again and again, the ghost of his wife reappears in Flaubert's story, when associations prompt a memory of her (for instance, the colour of Emma Bovary's eyes makes him remember the eye colour of his wife). This 'haunting' can be analysed as "traumatic 'flashback'" (Luckhurst 80). According to Jean-Francois Lyotard's view, "trauma freezes time, and therefore any possibility of narrative" (Luckhurst 80). Moreover, Braithwaite also gives us the (supposed) reason why he tells us Flaubert's story:

But by the time I tell you her story I want you to be prepared: that's to say, I want you to have had enough of books, and parrots, and lost letters, and bears, and the opinions of Dr Enid Starkie, and even the opinions of Dr Geoffrey Braithwaite. 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 am telling you Flaubert's story instead. (*FP* 86)

Braithwaite's story of Flaubert is fictional, as history and the past are narrative constructs (see de Groot 110-111). Although he gathers facts about Flaubert, he is unable to grasp the 'reality' of the past. At this point in time, he is still unable to confront his memories about his wife. Judith Lewis Herman (175) points out that "[t]raumatic memory [...] is wordless and static. The [...] initial account of the event may be repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless." Herman explains that recovery from a traumatic experience can be achieved by telling the trauma story. "This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (Herman 175). Herman quotes Breuer and Freud who claim that "recollection without affect almost invariable produces no result" (qtd. in Herman 177). This means that the telling of the trauma story should not only cover the 'bare' facts, but should reproduce the emotional state the traumatised person experienced (see Herman 177).

Roger Luckhurst cites Susan Brison who is of the opinion that

[n]arrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self. (qtd. in Luckhurst 82)

Brison's mechanism for coping with traumatic events is the speech act. The narrative act allows the traumatised to present the trauma in a way which gives the victim power over the traumatising events. Luckhurst (83) explains that "if trauma is a crisis of representation, then [the trauma narrative] generates narrative *possibility* just as much as *impossibility*, a compulsive outpouring of attempts to formulate narrative knowledge." Finally, Paul Ricoeur's theory is summarised by Luckhurst in three words: "Narrative heals aporia" (Luckhurst 84). Narration is a meaning-making process which will heal (over time) the traumatised.

Applying our knowledge of trauma theory to Braithwaite's attempt at biography, we come to understand that Flaubert's story is a cover up for his wife's suicide and the guilt he feels for 'switching her off' after she has fallen into a coma. His failure of presenting the reader with a 'full', comprehensive biography about Flaubert is a sign of his mind's fragmented state. As a consequence, his traumatised self is only able to relate unconnected bits and pieces of Flaubert's life-story or obsessively form lists of facts ('The Flaubert Bestiary'). The fragmented structure of his mind manifests itself in his narrative. Fragments of diary entries, letters, quotations from books and autobiographical comments interrupt Flaubert's biography.

Moreover, Braithwaite is fascinated by and obsessed with the past and Flaubertian relics: "I frequently had to get down on my knees to squint into the cabinets: the posture of the devout, but also of the junk-shop treasure-hunter" (FP 20). Braithwaite reflects, "What makes us randy for relics? [...]" (FP 12) Braithwaite expects to gain a better understanding of Flaubert's personality and of his life by engaging with Flaubert's relics. He hopes that the items have absorbed the writer's memories, and he will be able to access the past through them. The reader can deduce that it may have been Braithwaite's failure to connect and understand his wife, and that this may have been part of the reason why she committed suicide.

As the story unfolds, we come to realise the reason for Braithwaite's inability to connect to his wife can be found in his past which is his 'unclaimed experience' (see Cathy Caruth) of the war. He states, "Memories came out of hiding, but not emotions; not even the memories of emotions." (FP 14) During his visit to Flaubert's last residence at the Croisset pavilion he examines the exhibits and imagines Flaubert's last moments:

Two exhibits in a side cabinet are easy to miss: a small tumbler from which Flaubert took his last drink of water a few moments before he died; and a crumpled pad of white handkerchief with which he mopped his brow in perhaps the last gesture of his life. Such ordinary props [...] made me feel I had been present at the death of a friend. I was almost embarrassed: three days before I had stood unmoved on a beach where close companions had been killed. (FP 21)

This statement is an indication for his trauma. Only when he is able to confront his emotions of that time, then he will be able to move on (see Herman 117). This is the story – Braithwaite's story – which is hidden under Ellen's story. After Braithwaite is able to tell Ellen's story, the reader is finally able to understand his statement, "Three stories contend within me. One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself" (FP 86).

Geoffrey Braithwaite is unable to tell the comprehensive life-story of Flaubert. His narrative is constantly interrupted by metafictional and autobiographical comments; it is delayed due to the fact that Braithwaite gets carried away obsessing over little facts, anecdotes and comparisons of Flaubert's life to his works of fiction. His fragmented narrative can be interpreted as the result of traumatic experiences. At first, he is unable to confront his own past and the story of his wife. However, his obsessive preoccupation with the past and his compulsive re- and re-telling of Flaubert's story can be understood as his method of coming to terms with his past. In *Flaubert's Parrot* he exorcises the ghost of his past – his wife.

The narrative enables him to exert control over Flaubert's 'facts'. The reader is totally dependent on Braithwaite's reworking of the past. This empowers Braithwaite and gives him the confidence to confront Ellen's and his own story. In 'Cross Channel' Braithwaite directly addresses the reader and drops first

hints about his wife, Ellen. Yet, he is still unable to tell Ellen's story and immediately returns to recounting facts about Flaubert. However, the reader notices a shift in his narrating voice. In chapter eleven, 'Louise Colet's Version', Braithwaite gives voice to Louise Colet, Flaubert's long-time mistress. He rewrites Flaubert's life from a female perspective. Emma Cox (57) points out that this is Braithwaite's "indirect way of dealing with his unresolved grief and confusion about the wife he never really knew." While 'Louise Colet's Version' can be considered his indirect way of dealing with the loss of his wife, he presents more directly his Ellen's story in the 'Pure Story':

She was born in 1920, married in 1940, gave birth in 1942 and 1946, died in 1975." (*FP* 162)

I'll start again. She was a much-loved only child. She was a much-loved only wife. She was loved, if that's the word, by what I suppose I must agree to call her lovers, though I'm sure the word over-dignifies some of them. I loved her; we were happy; I miss her. She didn't love me; we were unhappy; I miss her. (*FP* 162)

"Ellen. My wife: someone I feel I understand less well than a foreign writer dead for a hundred years. Is this an aberration, or is it normal? Books say: She did this because. Life says: She did this." (*FP* 168)

Geoffrey Braithwaite's 'biography' of Gustave Flaubert is a series of substitutions: Braithwaite is incapable of telling Flaubert's story therefore he attempts to disclose the truth about the parrot Loulou. When he finds himself unable to do so, this story is replaced by the story of Braithwaite's wife Ellen and his own story. The quest for Flaubert and for the parrot Loulou helps Braithwaite to overcome his traumas of the past. His compulsive retelling of Flaubert's life helps him to find his voice. As his voice gets stronger, he becomes more self-assured so that he even names chapter twelve after himself: 'Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas'. Finally, he is able to tell Ellen's story; he begins to come to terms with the past, and accepts that some things will forever remain unknown: he will never be able to understand the complete truth about his wife, or find out which parrot is the authentic one:

There, standing in a line, were the Amazonian parrots. Of the original fifty only three remained. [...] They gazed at me like three quizzical, sharp-eyed, dandruff-ridden, dishonourable old men. They did look – I had to admit it – a little cranky. I stared at them for a minute or so, and then dodged away.

Perhaps it was one of them. (*FP* 190)

4. CONCLUSION

The contemporary literary market shows enormous interest in biographies which deal with the lives and works of famous (and not so famous) writers and artists. Postmodern biofictions like Antonia S. Byatt's *Possession*, Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* display the belief that a truthful, authentic representation of the biographer's subject - and of the past in general - is impossible. They expose the 'authentic' as artificial and cast doubt on the absoluteness proclaimed by conventional biographies. As a consequence, these novels employ postmodern concepts like genre-blurring, fragmentation, metafictionality, intertextuality and self-reflexivity, as well as a playful use of fact and fiction, to illustrate the constructedness of the past. Moreover, readers perceive in these works a shift of focus from the portrayal of the biographee to a representation of the biographer's quest for his subject.

The genre 'biography' has seen the development from Johnson's and Boswell's complete picture of the artist, to modernists' aesthetic experiments, to the fragmented life-stories we encounter today. Especially modernism proved to be a huge influence on postmodern biofictions. Modernism showed biography to be truthful as well as playful, presenting satiric biographical sketches or fictionalized quests. Life-writing used narrative devices like irony and parody and explored possibilities of how life-stories could be written. In addition, the relationship between the biographer and his subject changed, too. Had, for instance, the Victorian biographer shown an awe-struck attitude towards his biographee, so much more 'free' appeared the modernist biographer who shed all inhibitions and presented himself as equal to his subject. Furthermore, the biographer frequently displayed self-consciousness which resulted in some form of autobiography. These features, and even earlier influences, can be found in postmodern biographies, literary biographies and fictional metabiographies.

Authors like A. S. Byatt, Julian Barnes and Peter Ackroyd question society's voyeuristic desires by looking critically at the role of the biographer and his methods. How do biographers attain new sources - like previously unpublished letters, manuscripts and journals? How does the biographer behave towards the

rightful owners of these documents? Would they stop at nothing to get their hands on unknown papers? Often biographers (and scholars) are depicted as 'vultures' who would even resort to grave-robbery in order to uncover literary legacies which would further their (academic) career.

Postmodern biofictions like *Possession*, *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Chatterton* present the contemporary attitude towards biography and the biographer's work by deconstructing biographical conventions. Features like chronology, a teleological structure, coherence, and the sense of 'authenticity', as well as conformity to genre expectations are undermined and exposed. The novels mirror today's belief that it is impossible to give a faithful representation of the subject's 'true' personality or render its 'whole' reality. There are always intentional or unintentional gaps in a life-story caused by the artists themselves or by their relatives who wanted to preserve the 'myth' the artists had created for themselves. Sometimes valuable documents are destroyed (viz. by 'burning' the letters) so that they are irrevocably lost to academic research. Another device which is frequently employed is to present two or more timelines: they illustrate how we compare the past to the present and show how the latter interprets the former. Moreover, the novels highlight that the depiction of the biographee is a construct, and dependent on the biographer's selection, manipulation and interpretation of sources, as well as his personal approach and narrative technique. The biographer acts as a mediating agent between the biographee and the reader. If the biographer becomes too involved with his subject, an objective portrayal becomes impossible; it might even lead to the biographee's representation as mirror image of his biographer's narcissistic desire for self-fulfilment. Additionally, the fragmented identity of the biographer might manifest itself in the fragmented life-story of the subject so that readers are never given a final, 'complete' biography.

We live with the belief that the 'real', 'true' subject is undiscoverable. Therefore, the quest for this unattainable grail – the authentic – reveals our desire for something absolute. Byatt, Barnes and Ackroyd use postmodern features to reflect on this, on genre conventions, and on how the present represents and/or reinvents the past.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Literaturmarkt bezeugt enormes Interesse an Biographien, die sich mit dem Leben und Schaffen von Schriftstellern und Künstlern beschäftigen. Die Romane von Antonia S. Byatt (*Possession*), Julian Barnes (*Flaubert's Parrot*) und Peter Ackroyd (*Chatterton*), die man als postmoderne Bio-Fiktionen oder fiktionale Metabiographien bezeichnen kann, setzen sich kritisch mit dem Genre ‚Biographie‘ auseinander und hinterfragen die Darstellungsmöglichkeit der Vergangenheit. Dies führt zu Überlegungen wie: Kann ein Leben in all seiner Facettenvielfalt mit einem literarischen Medium dargestellt werden? Kann die Vergangenheit eingefangen werden?

Dieser Skeptizismus veranlasst Byatt, Barnes und Ackroyd in ihren Werken Betrachtungen über den Biographen und dessen Methoden anzustellen. Mit welchen Vorgehensweisen gelangt der Biograph an seine Materialien – Dokumente wie unveröffentlichte Manuskripte, Briefe, Tagebücher oder Notizbücher? Wie verhält sich der Biograph gegenüber den rechtlichen Eigentümern dieser Dokumente? Ein besonderes Augenmerk wird außerdem auf die Vereinnahmung des Dargestellten durch den Biographen gelegt. Prozesse, wie Selektion, Manipulation und Interpretation der Quellen, sowie die ideologische Herangehensweise und narrative Präsentation des Biographen verfälschen das Bild, welches vom Künstler beim Leser entsteht.

Um diese und ähnliche Problematiken zu thematisieren und in den Vordergrund zu rücken, werden in *Possession*, *Flaubert's Parrot* und *Chatterton* postmoderne Merkmale wie das Verwischen von Gattungsgrenzen, das Spiel mit Fakt und Fiktion, Fragmentierung, sowie Metafiktionalität, Intertextualität und Selbstreflektion eingesetzt. Darüber hinaus wird der Schwerpunkt von einer ‚fertigen‘ Biographie auf eine Art Autobiographie des Biographen umgelenkt. Dabei handelt es sich um eine auf die Metaebene gehobene Darstellung der ‚Gralssuche‘ des Biographen nach dem ‚wahren‘ Künstler und deren biographische Rekonstruktion. Dem Leser wird vor Augen geführt, dass eine ‚authentische‘ Realitäts- und Vergangenheitsrekonstruktion unmöglich ist.

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