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**HOW NEW IS THE NEW BIOGRAPHY?
SOME REMARKS ON THE MISLEADING TERM'S
PAST AND PRESENT**

Abstract

The article discusses the issue of the so-called “new biography” by underscoring ambiguity of the term and presenting the different variants of “new biography” it encompasses. In order to do that, an introduction is made where the tenets of the classical biography are outlined. The inquiry focuses chiefly on England and the USA, although remarks are also made with respect to biographical writing in other countries. It appears that the term is contemporarily mainly associated with Lytton Strachey’s model of biography which, having been formulated in 1918, proved a breakthrough in life writing, since it operated with ironic detachment from the protagonist. Strachey perceived biography as an art and was determined to speak openly about all spheres of the biographee’s life. The article proves that although other attempts at creating a “new biography” were made after Strachey (by Leon Edel and Jo Burr Margadant), their newness is either derivative and supplementary to Strachey’s achievement, or advances a wholly new notion of biography, with the concept of multiplicity of the protagonist’s self. As the Stracheyan biographical model is almost a century old, one can assume that what is understood as “new biography” is not so new after all. In the meantime, though, biographical practice has taken a turn and a novelistic mode of writing, i.e. biofiction, has become the current paradigm. The author therefore suggests that the present-day understanding of “new biography” be reconsidered by recognizing biofiction as one of the figures of biographical “newness”.

Key words

new biography, Lytton Strachey, biographical studies, biofiction

The term “new biography” is widely used, but its meaning can be misleading and ambiguous. Over several decades, scholars who delved into the issue of biography have used it in different contexts and connotations. This practice is quite understandable, since the term in itself seems quite innocuous and might simply refer to the innovative component(s) of the most recent biography type, in comparison with its predecessors. The problem appears when several “new biographies” are encountered, referring each time to a different issue and period in history. Consequently, a number of occurrences called “new biography” appear in biographical discourse, causing perplexity and confusion. Hence, an urge arises to describe, clarify and systematize the whole range of “new biographies” which, indeed, encompass different notions and characteristics. The following paper is an attempt to elucidate what is meant by the different “new biographies”, mainly in English-speaking countries (especially England and the USA), with the primary focus put on England, as it can be perceived as the cradle of modern biography. Biographical interest has been strongest in England, which is regarded by some scholars, such as Jürgen Schläeger, as more prone to individualism and experience, as opposed to Germany for example, whose predilection to “systematic thinking” and “philosophical traditions¹” is stronger. In order to present the matter in the clearest possible way, a chronological principle has been chosen in the discussion that follows. Nevertheless, the informative and illustrative attempt of the article to define the various forms of the “new biographies” in contemporary literary discourse is not the only one. It is also my intention to put forward some ideas which could serve as a modest contribution to a revision of the term, based on the observed literary practice of today. My observations concern biofictions that are, in my opinion, contemporary successors of the “new biography”. Perhaps it is time to reconsider what can be named “new biography”, today and in the future.

THE BEGINNING

Biography as practice, not necessarily as a term or genre, has been known in the Western culture for 2500 years. Its onset can be traced to ancient Greece where *bioi*, ancient counterparts of contemporary biographies, were written by such masters as Herodotus, Damascius, Xenophon or Plato. Little is known of the overall shape of the oldest biographies, but it can be stated

¹ Citation after: Tridgell 2004, p. 13.

for certain that “biographies came into being at approximately the same time as general historiography²”. Whereas Hellenistic biographers wrote mainly biographies of philosophers and poets, the biographers of the age of the Roman Empire preferred men of action and rulers as their protagonists. Surprisingly though, life depiction by Plutarch, Suetonius and Tacitus is not a simple consolidation of gains; it provides both an enumeration of the protagonist’s exploits and an attempt at a subtle portraiture. Plutarch’s contribution to life-writing is especially significant since he distinguished between *praxeis* (the protagonist’s life and accomplishments depicted in a chronological sequence) and *ethos* (his character and moral conduct)³, and biography designed in accordance with his guidelines was considered as a model of the genre. Generally, the ancient Greek and Roman biographies still serve as a frame of reference for younger biographies and are treated as a standard in life-writing, therefore they are described here as “traditional” or “classical”, as opposed to “new”. Accordingly, the set of traits which make up traditional biography is as follows: a recognizable and distinguished protagonist, a chronological order of true events from birth to death, depiction of the individual’s public activity (private life is disregarded as insignificant), intentional objectivity in life-depiction (though only ostensible/desired), the biographer’s inconspicuousness (transparency) and – usually – a pedagogical aim of the biography. These characteristics were trivialized in the ages that followed with the onset of Christianity in Europe and the dominating role of hagiographies in biographical writing. Most medieval hagiographies are alarmingly uniform in terms of life depiction and the didactic potential due to the main interest of the Church in hagiographies – to inculcate piety in the faithful. Hence, the truth about saints was not a priority to the authors of this genre⁴. The oversimplification and deterioration of biographical standards in the Middle Ages was a fact, and not until the renaissance had begun in Europe, did the restoration of the biographical genre take place. Secularisation of biography and reinstatement of “great men” as its subjects, contributed to a renewal and development of the genre. Francesco Petrarca’s “De viris illustribus” (“On Famous Men”, 1384) and Giovanni Boccaccio’s “De casibus virorum illustrium” (“On the Fate of Famous Men”, 1355-74) can serve as best examples of the renaissance variant of the genre, although Boccaccio was much more prone to bending facts and manufacturing

² Momigliano 1993, p. 12.

³ Possing 2015, p. 29.

⁴ Garraty 1957, p. 60.

anecdotes⁵. In England, in turn, the development took place considerably later, in the baroque, when requirement of impartiality of the biographer towards his biographee was reiterated and focus was put on “the coverage of private concerns⁶”. Additionally, the significance of ordinary individuals’ lives was asserted, especially by Roger North (1651-1734) who convincingly argued that any person’s life can be interesting⁷, if recreated by an apt and devoted biographer. All these modifications in biographical writing were heralds of the upcoming revolution within the genre, with Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) and James Boswell (1740-1795) as leading figures.

THE NEW BEGINNING

With Samuel Johnson’s groundbreaking biography of Richard Savage (“The Life of Richard Savage”, 1744), new light was cast on the realm of biography and some of the fundamental principles of the genre were questioned. Firstly, the figure of the subject was non-standard, as Richard Savage was not even remotely a paragon of virtue or talent, but a third-class poet with a criminal and scandalizing record. Consequently, his biography was practically devoid of didactic value. Secondly, Johnson did not aim at an objective life-depiction of his protagonist, whom he knew personally and could freely consult while working on his biography. Thirdly, in “The Life of Richard Savage”, the biographee’s public achievements do not play the pivotal role, as opposed to the details from his private and personal life, his mannerisms and an overall picture of the “inner man⁸” that he was. All the above characteristics, together with the protagonist’s *modus vivendi*, can be perceived as the first signs of a process of demythologization and redefinition of an ideal subject, who did not need to be a hero or to have an interesting and inspiring life. Paradoxically, here lies the pedagogical potential of Johnson’s biography. As Michael Benton puts it,

Johnson’s educative principle is that people learn from other people’s experiences, from particulars not from generalities, from life histories in which everyone can imaginatively recognise shared hopes and problems, not from “histories of the downfall of kingdoms and revolutions of empires”⁹.

⁵ Egeland 2000, p. 37.

⁶ Clifford 1962, p. xii.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Edel 1987, p. 37.

⁹ Benton 2009, p. 10.

Thus a new didactic value of biography was put forward. It could be defined as seeking empathy and understanding among the readers by putting focus on the imperfect human, whose right is to err. The tremendous success of Johnson's biography with the readers and critics was an important sign of the end of humdrum panegyric biographies (although the Victorian "pseudobiography", mentioned in the text that follows, can be seen as a prolonged exception). Johnson's disciple and friend, James Boswell, followed in his master's footsteps, and even elaborated on and refined his method and biographical practice by writing a biography of Johnson himself. His monumental work, "The Life of Dr. Johnson" (1791), comprises over 1000 pages and is a scrupulous and painstaking minutes of the writer's otherwise quite uneventful life (even though Johnson was clubbable and talkative, his leisure pursuits restricted to book writing and discussions with friends, as well as occasional travels). Boswell became acquainted with Johnson when he was 22 (Johnson was 54 at that time and enjoyed a high position in the English literary world) and decided to write his biography by gathering all possible material and writing down his protagonist's utterances, jokes and observations. His primary goal was to "let Johnson speak for himself"¹⁰, i.e. to show him in his natural environment, cite his own words and let his personality unfold in numerous, ostensibly trivial and tedious situations. In order to do so, Boswell incorporated authentic documents, extracts from letters, obituaries and other sources¹¹. The important "deviation" from the classical norm was that Boswell did not present the protagonist's life from cradle to grave, but concentrated on his last twenty years, i.e. the period when he accompanied him. This was a new perspective on the protagonist; it did not make a life's temporal aspect its crucial element, but preferred an internal voyage to explore his "real self". Personality was the key notion for Boswell, so recreating the life of Johnson not only encompassed note-taking and material-gathering, but also creating "occasions, incidents, encounters, for the life he would ultimately write"¹². This could obviously lead to manipulation and inventing "facts" in the protagonist's life, but the primary aim of such practice was exposing his character in interaction with others. What was crucial, though, in Boswell's enterprise, was his observation that sometimes in order to tell the truth about the subject, creativity and gap-filling have to be employed. As a result, his biography of Johnson is one of the first biogra-

¹⁰ Sisman, 2001, p. 171.

¹¹ Benton 2009, p. 11.

¹² Edel 1957, p. 13.

phies where the events were scarce, but the protagonist's personality was depicted in a possibly truthful manner, i.e. without excessive idealizing which was often the case in classical biographies. It is also worth mentioning that Johnson and Boswell actually introduced literary biography in England, and thus promoted writing about "lives of the sedentary"¹³, as was pointed out by Virginia Woolf much later.

THE NEW BIOGRAPHY BY STRACHEY

Although Johnson and Boswell's biographies were undoubtedly a modern breakthrough within the genre, a real revolution was to come in the 1920s. It might seem strange that over 100 years had passed between the publication of Boswell's biography of Johnson and the onset of the "new biography", i.e. publication of "Eminent Victorians" by Lytton Strachey in 1918, but biography in the 19th century regressed tremendously, mainly due to the prolonged Victorian era in England, which explains the time span. The Victorian biographies were known for their prudery, they were hagiographic in their uncritical attitude towards the protagonist and entirely didactic and eulogistic in their tone. Some critics of the genre even called them "pseudobiographies"¹⁴, since they failed in rendering the whole picture of their subjects and "covered up unpalatable facts about the subjects' private lives"¹⁵. The poorly condition of the genre in the 19th century was one of the factors which contributed to the appearance of a new model of biography, known as the "new biography". Apart from the strictly literary reasons for its onset, there would also be more profound and grievous ones, i.e. World War I and the deep crisis it brought about in Europe. The new biography was supposed to be a remedy, or at least an antidote, to the gruesomeness of the war which deprived an individual human being of any value. The rise of the "new biography" was, interestingly enough, not local but universal, since the idea of a renewal within the genre appeared almost simultaneously in England, Germany and France. It is customary, though, to perceive Lytton Strachey's set of biographies, "Eminent Victorians", as emblematic for the new direction in life-depiction, or even, as Laura Marcus suggests, as "the defining text of

¹³ Woolf 1958, p. 151.

¹⁴ Kendall 1965, p. 105.

¹⁵ Skidelsky 1988, p. 4.

the ‘new biography’¹⁶. Since then, the Stracheyan biographies have had the status of the “new biography”, which is broadly recognized and referred to by all researchers of the genre also today. What was new in “the new biography” from 1918? “Almost everything” – one could jokingly answer, at least when its hagiographical or panegyric predecessors are treated as a frame of reference. First of all, this selection of biographies of four eminent personalities from the Victorian age, cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and Charles Gordon, is debunking in its attitude towards the biographees and, as Nigel Hamilton aptly observes, is “brilliantly effective in smashing Victorian reputations¹⁷”. Secondly, its volume is surprisingly modest, as opposed to the detailed and lengthy enunciations of the Victorian biographers, or, for that matter, Johnson’s and Boswell’s. Thirdly, it shuns the biographer’s proclaimed invisibility in life-depiction, excelling, in turn, in manifesting his own personality. Fourthly, it is amusing and humorous in describing its subjects, and its sardonic tone and “ironic detachment¹⁸” become the genre’s trademark and is soon to be imitated by the admirers of Strachey’s talent. All in all, the tenets of Stracheyan biography were almost a complete contradiction of the Victorian pseudobiography’s principle and drew a clear boundary between the old times and the new, disillusioned, post-war ones. One could also describe the Stracheyan biographical project as “truth-telling”, but it is worth emphasizing that “the truth” is somewhat difficult to define by Strachey, since he contradicts himself by stating that he aims at “lay[ing] bare facts of some cases (...) dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions¹⁹” and simultaneously he makes reservations that his visions are “haphazard” and that his choice of subjects was determined “by simple motives of convenience and of art²⁰”. Importantly, the “new biographies” which followed were accompanied by theoretical publications, both normative and descriptive. As I have indicated, the new tendency within the domain of biographical portraiture involved also writers and theoreticians from other countries, making biography one of the most widespread and debated genres of the 1920s and 1930s. Numerous writers published their biographies at the time, as for example the German-Swiss Emil Ludwig (1881-1848), whose biography of Napoleon (1926) brought him a great

¹⁶ Marcus 2002, p. 197.

¹⁷ Hamilton 2007, p. 151.

¹⁸ Kendall 1965, p. 114.

¹⁹ Strachey 1934, p. ix.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. vii.

success, and the French André Maurois (1885-1967), whose biographies' literary qualities cannot be underestimated. These same authors, along with lots of others, produced theoretical works which in many cases could be called "biographical procedurals", as they both encompassed descriptions of the extant biographies, reflections on the working process and methodology of life-writing, and anticipations of the genre's future. Nigel Nicolson's "The Development of English Biography" (1927) can serve as a good example of this practice in England, as well as André Maurois' "Aspects of Biography" (1929) which referred to Nicolson's reflections and pondered over biography's doubtful status as a science. Emil Ludwig's work "Die Kunst der Biographie" was published somewhat later (1936), but its line of inquest into the matter was similar. Among the literary personalities who expressed their views on the "new biography" and experimented with the genre as well was Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), whose essay "The New Biography" (1927) was one of the founding texts of the genre and still plays a central role in biographical discourse. The essay is enthusiastic towards Strachey's biographical prose and disdainful of the Victorian type of biographism, but it also elaborates on the limitations, impossibilities and ambivalence of life-writing. Woolf claims, for example, that biography writing is "trying to mix the truth of real life and the truth of fiction²¹", which essentially must prove unfeasible, and yet is the only way the (new) biographer can choose. In her other articles on the subject, for instance in "I am Christina Rossetti" (1930) she accuses the genre of belittling its protagonists²², while in the novel "Flush: A Biography" (1930) she mocks the biographical convention by providing an in-depth study of a cocker-spaniel's inner life. To sum up, the "new biography", introduced by Lytton Strachey and later taken up by various artists throughout Europe (and the USA), changed the face of the genre and in a short time became the new standard. Its prerogatives were the demythologizing character of the biographical narration, the ambiguity as to the real subject of the biography (is it only the biographee? Or, perhaps the biographer as well?), brevity, selectiveness and humour. The importance of the relation between truth and fiction was also one of its central interests. This, in fact, initiated a discourse on the biography's rightful affiliation (is biography a science or an art? What methods should be employed in life-writing? How much liberty is a biographer allowed? How to choose a right protagonist for oneself?),

²¹ Woolf 1958, p. 154.

²² Woolf 1967, p. 51-60.

which is still topical. The “new biography’s” prevalence in the 1920s and 1930s might seem puzzling, but it is clearly a sign of the genre’s “coming of age”, as the numerous theoretical deliberations on the matter are nothing less but a call for legitimization of this genre in the academic circles. Alas, the Stracheyan biographical formula became trivialized in a short time, mainly owing to its imitators who contributed to the fact that the formula “as a permanent filter (...) proved a dead end for biography²³”.

THE NEW BIOGRAPHY BY EDEL

The Stracheyan model of biography, once and for all, set out a new standard in life-depiction and encouraged theoretical and pragmatic reflection on biography. One of the most important scholars who took up the subject was an American, Leon Edel (1907-1997), an author of the renowned Henry James’ biography and one of the best theoreticians of literary biography as such. Edel saw himself as one of the heirs of Strachey’s heritage, so his remarks on the process of biography-writing should be seen as an elaboration on his master’s achievements. Nevertheless, he did much more than elaboration: in “Writing Lives: Principia Biographica” (1984), which should be seen as a follow-up to his major critical work “Literary Biography” (1957), he put down a set of rules for future biographers, provided an extensive description and criticism of chosen biographers (Boswell, Strachey, Van Wyck Brooks), and gave an account of his own struggles and dilemmas with life-writing. He also called his four rules of biography-writing as “the foundations of the New Biography: the biography we have been creating since the days of Lytton Strachey²⁴”. The principles he proposed had, indeed, a lot in common with Strachey. Basically, they came down to the issue of the mutual relation between the biographer and the biographee, which was the very core of the biographer-oriented Stracheyan model. His primary goal seemed to be deciphering the “true person” behind the works, that is why he focused on finding the key to “the deeper truths²⁵” and discerning “the figure under the carpet²⁶”. In Edel’s reflection, however, much more attention was paid to the biographer’s figure than to his/her subject. He discussed, for instance,

²³ Hamilton 2007, p. 152.

²⁴ Edel 1987, p. 31.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 29.

²⁶ Ibidem.

the emotional attitude of the biographer to the biographee (biographers “can’t fall in love with them [their subjects]²⁷”) and emphasized the necessity of his/her understanding of the subject’s actions and motivations. Last but not least, the biographer’s own literary talent was just as important as that of the biographee’s, therefore, a lot of attention should be drawn to the very form and structure of the biography. Edel stated that they ought to reflect (or rather recreate) the protagonist’s way of thinking, remembering and speaking. In other words, he found the old chronological and linear order of narrative outdated and proposed a new one, which should be closer to fiction in its language and artistic form²⁸. All in all, Edel’s “new biography” elaborated on Stracheyan ideas and reinforced them by encouraging the biographer’s literary potential and creativity. The interpretative role of the biographer was also crucial for his biographical reflections; it is especially noticeable in the proclaimed investigative aspirations of the biographer whose task was to establish and indicate the protagonist’s “private mythology²⁹”.

THE NEW BIOGRAPHY BY BURR MARGADANT

Although the position of the “new biography” in the Stracheyan and Woolfian sense seems unquestionable and recognizable in biography studies, another “new biography” appeared in 2000 which ignored the tradition of the term and all the associations it evoked. The initiative was undertaken by Jo Burr Margadant and the publication “The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France”, which became another “version” of the new biography and which she edited. In what respect is Burr Margadant’s collection of essays different? This volume, authored by six accomplished historians and edited by Burr Margadant, consists of eight contributions on famous women in nineteenth-century France who owed their success in the public sphere to their ability to perform their femininity. As Burr Margadant explains it herself in the introduction to the volume, its subject is

a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflect the passage of time, the demands and options of different settings, or the variety of ways that others seek to represent the person³⁰.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 30.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Burr Margadant 2000, p. 7.

The crucial stance of the book is therefore conceptually different from that of, say, Strachey or his followers, who perceived the human identity as unified, “though not necessarily unconflicted³¹”, whereas Burr Margadant’s point of view is postmodern in its convictions on the multiple character of the self. Together with the other authors of the volume, she investigates the ways in which the eight eminent French women “created their public identities by manipulating rather than challenging the ideology of gender difference that relegated women to the domestic sphere³²”. Her and the other authors’ perspective is feminist and gender-oriented, and the perception of the protagonist as an active agent in creating her persona (as well as the private self) aims at empowering the subject and equipping her with mechanisms of self-creation, which Stracheyan or other modern protagonists lacked. In other words, Burr Margadant did not focus on the way that the environment had formed the protagonist, but on the choices the subject had made to create her own identity. It is, though, significant that the eight contributions cannot be seen as biographies, but as academic interpretations of their subjects’ lives, which locates the work amongst scholarly publications rather than actual biographies. The feminist perspective may therefore serve as a source of inspiration for future biographers, but is not a “new biography” as such.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN? THE CASE OF BIOFICTION

All the “new biographies” discussed above do not exhaust the topic, since the notion also occurs in other, minor contexts. Nevertheless, the presented concepts of newness in biography-writing are the most crucial and representative. From the material presented above, it can be assumed that the central and groundbreaking “new biography” is the one formed according to Lytton Strachey’s rules, whilst Leon Edel’s contribution to the matter derives significantly from the Stracheyan concept of the biographer’s importance in the life-recreating process. Certainly, the input of the fathers of modern biography – Johnson and Boswell – should be appreciated, as their works should be seen as an intermediate between the classical biography and the new one.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Prestwich 2001, p. 230.

The newness of Strachey's biography entailed an artistic, fiction-inspired language, a detached and ironic attitude to the protagonist and commitment to telling the truth, and also the unpopular and prominent position of the biographer. The same can be said about Edel's biography and its objective: to unveil the biographee's personality and decipher the "figure under the carpet". Apparently, the newest "new biography", the feminist one by Jo Burr Margadant, did not refer to the famous predecessors, which can be interpreted as an intentional overlooking of the dominating biographical pattern in order to propose a new start uncontaminated by previous biographical realizations. However, time will tell whether the newness in biography, according to Burr Margadant (i.e. her conviction on the multiplicity of self and her proclaiming the value of an individual's own decisions over the influence of its environment), will become a new biographical standard. For now, in the majority of biographical discourses, the "new biography" is first and foremost associated with Strachey's achievements, even though it is almost one hundred years old. It is my conviction, though, the time has come to revise our understanding of the "new biography" by scrupulous observation of today's biographical practice. What is perhaps escaping contemporary biography scholars is a genre (?), or rather a mode of writing whose proliferation is indeed worth a reflection. What is meant here is the genre of biofiction, which in several ways seems to satisfy the readers' constant appetite for "true stories".

Located on the border between two separate ontological spheres – fiction and reality – biography has always been a problematic genre due to its debt to both the concrete life of the individual it describes and to the realm of fiction, whose tools and findings it eagerly employs. Biofiction, in turn, being a mode of writing whose "factional" commitment is limited, can be regarded as a postmodern answer to biographical desire of readers, but it is much more engaged in fiction than any previous forms of biographical writing. Biofiction is not at all a new occurrence. It has already appeared in the form of biographical novels, "fictionized biographies" and "novels-as-biographies" in Kendall's terminology³³, or "narrative biography" and "fictional biography", according to James L. Clifford's differentiation³⁴. The term itself was coined relatively recently, in 1991, by Alain Buisine, who defines biofictions as postmodern forms which are paradoxical in their endeavour to represent

³³ Kendall 1965, p. 126-128.

³⁴ Clifford 1970, p. 87-89.

a life of a historical person, knowing that the project is doomed to failure due to the author's unintentional, yet immanent subjectivity³⁵. In other words, biofiction can be defined as biographical fiction which embraces the impossibility of its objectives and cannot be held accountable to the truth. However, it is perhaps not the protagonist who should be placed in focus of a biofictional work, but the author's projection of him or her, which is brought to the surface by means of numerous strategies inherent in the realm of fiction (perspective of the narrator, the focus and mode of narration, the chosen storyline(s), the selection of events, the narrator's visibility, moral judgment or lack of it, insight into thoughts of the protagonist etc.). The tendency in literature, where the border between reality and fiction is blurred, should be seen in context of greater changes in historiographic discourse, with Hayden White as a leading figure. White's groundbreaking findings, drawing level between fiction and history thanks to their common denominator (lack of tangible reference)³⁶, can be seen as an act of legitimizing the already existing literary trends, which consist in a single term: hybridity. Therefore, the biofictional boom is a manifestation of a broader postmodernist tendency where the "anything goes" principle is one of the governing ones.

BIOFICTION IN PRACTICE

Some of the most interesting examples of the genre's diversification are two contemporary biofictions on the life of Henry James, who was otherwise known for his secretiveness surrounding his private life. They were both published in 2004 with a few months' interval and both addressed the very same subject: the writer's "middle years". The first, "The Master", was written by Colm Toibín; the other, "Author, Author", by David Lodge. In spite of the obvious similarities in terms of the same protagonist and the chosen period of his life, the two novels differ substantially as to their narrative strategies. Whilst Toibín ("The Master") employs the Jamesian mode of narration, focusing almost exclusively on the protagonist's thoughts, on an "inner chamber"³⁷ of James' consciousness, Lodge ("Author, author") puts another issue in focus, i.e. James' friendship with George Du Maurier and thus introduces a more dramatic storyline in his text. Another important matter

³⁵ Buisine 1991, pp. 7-13.

³⁶ White 1990, p. 82.

³⁷ Hollinghurst 2004.

concerns the attitude of both authors towards the genre that they embarked upon. Toibín's work purports to be fiction, avoiding references in the form of paratexts or a preface to Henry James and his life. "Author, author", in turn, entails a list of acknowledgements where Lodge accounts for the made-up episodes and persons. This act can be regarded as a desire to remain within the referential genre of biography, even though Lodge states that "this book is a novel, and structured like a novel"³⁸. This is true, indeed, that his biofiction strives to behold the best of both worlds. Lodge operates with typically novelistic strategies, introducing a frame story (the dying James) and an actual story (friendship with Du Maurier), numerous dialogues and descriptions, but the knowledge on James and his times he amassed in the novel could rightfully serve the purpose of a traditional, referential and truth-bound biography. Both authors refer to James using his first name in order to, as Vanessa Guignery sees it, bring the protagonist closer to the reader³⁹, but whilst in the case of Toibín's somewhat claustrophobic and insular prose this familiarity is fully understandable and justified, in Lodge's book it seems at times misplaced due to the narrative. Both novels, despite their seeming resemblance in terms of the protagonist and stage in his life, can be said to have different purposes: Toibín investigates the relation between the author's psyche and the painstaking writing process, and Lodge prefers to elucidate those episodes in James' life which, to his mind, were crucial to understanding the author as a private person. They both represent two different faces of contemporary biofiction: one that takes the liberty of combining freely the categories of fiction and reality by creative imitation of Jamesian style, and the other that in spite of its declarations, resorts to the more traditional solutions.

Another example of a contemporary pair of biofictions whose structure and composition differ substantially despite the same protagonist can be "Marie: A Novel about the Life of Madame Tussaud" (1983, English edition 1986, translated by Patricia Crampton) by Danish author Dorrit Willumsen, and "Madame Tussaud: A Novel of the French Revolution" (2011) by Michelle Moran. Both novels, relatively truthfully, recreate the actual story of Marie Tussaud, the French artist and creator of the museum of wax figures, and their narrative strategies undoubtedly make them part of the biofictive genre. However, the selected material constituting a story differs to a great extent.

³⁸ Lodge 2006, p. 9.

³⁹ Guignery 2007.

Whilst Willumsen's novel recreates Tussaud's life in a relatively traditional manner (the storyline is unilinear and basically chronological, the main character matures with time, a teleological pattern of the protagonist's fate is applied etc.), Moran selects only six years of Marie Tussaud's life to tell her story – the years of the French Revolution. What the two novels have in common is the type of narrator, quite untypical of what one associates with the biographical genre. While in the two novels on Henry James the authors resorted to the most reliable third person, auctorial narrator, in both stories on Marie Tussaud a type of narrator characteristic of autobiographies is chosen, i.e. the first person narrator, lending its voice to the protagonist herself. Admittedly, the first person narrator in Willumsen's novel intertwines with a seemingly objective third person narrator, but the perspective is consistently that of Marie Tussaud. Moran's Tussaud speaks for herself throughout the whole novel. Again, both biofictions serve quite different purposes and render different images of their protagonists. The Danish author's work excels in conveying a portrait of an "inner person", a study of the consciousness of an artist who does not compromise on the social conventions of her times, a surprisingly modern woman unable to juggle her private life with a professional career without paying an ultimate price for her choices. In Michelle Moran's representation of Marie Tussaud external factors play the crucial role, and the dramatic occurrences of the French Revolution and its actors are the main motivation of action. Lively dialogues, descriptions of historical events and persons allow the reader to locate the work on the border between a historical and biographical novel. When a reader of Willumsen's work is required to have some previous knowledge of the French Revolution and its heroes, Moran facilitates the reading by extensive explanations and an appendix where the most important terms are gathered and clarified. In other words: Willumsen's biofiction proposes total immersion in the protagonist's psyche, without providing a comprehensive image of those historical times, as opposed to Moran's novel which presents the historical figure as a consequence of the epoch she lives in.

But why do I actually maintain that what was once (and still is!) called the "new biography" has been substituted or supplanted by biofiction? The answer is that when inspected closely, biofictions display numerous similarities to their predecessors. Firstly, biofictions can be seen as the fruit of the debunking-type of biography, initiated by Strachey, since there is no place for heroization of protagonists who tend to be represented today as ordinary people rather than unattainable ideals. Secondly, protagonists of biofictions

are often depicted as “self-made men/women”, i.e. the human will and character are perceived as the prime movers in creating a successful life (as opposed to fate, which used to play that role in numerous traditional biographies). This conviction is the core of Burr Margadant’s revisions of past female lives. Thirdly, biofictions are the realm of the narrator’s subjectivity, which is the only reliable value in the postmodern world where only fiction is capable of telling a true, i.e. universal, story. This, in turn, can be seen as a contribution of both Strachey and Edel, who emphasized the significance of the narrator in a biography. The important position that biofictions hold today is reassured by the underlying statement about the discursive nature of all representations of the past, and the origin of the mistrust towards reality and the past can already be traced back to Strachey’s enunciations in “Eminent Victorians”. Thus, the new biography is still alive, but it has modernized its form.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporarily, the term “new biography” refers more to an aesthetic phenomenon dating back to the 1920s than to actual innovation within biographical writing. Some attempts are made to redefine it, but they are either too closely related to the original idea of Lytton Strachey, and hence do not propose much newness (Leon Edel), or they proclaim a totally different understanding of innovation and introduce another approach to the already existing biographical narratives (Jo Burr Margadant). In the meantime, biofictional writing, which originates from a postmodernist conviction of the discursive nature of the past and unreliability of the (narrative) truth, has conquered the kingdom of biography and relativized the essence of biography, i.e. its referentiality. Biofictions can be regarded as a continuation of Stracheyan, Woolfian and Edelian “new biography”, since they employ the same principles: perceive biography as an art, locate the narrator and its choices in the centre of the work, avoid idealization of their protagonists and perceive selectiveness as the key to a good story. Therefore, it is my hope that biofictions will soon be named “new biographies”, or at least trigger a discussion on the condition of the genre today.

HOW NEW IS THE NEW BIOGRAPHY? SOME REMARKS ON THE MISLEADING TERM'S PAST AND PRESENT

Summary

The aim of the paper is to outline the phenomena which tend to be subsumed under the term of “new biography”, especially in the English-speaking discourse in the British Isles and the USA. This is due to the fact that, as it turns out, theorists and practitioners of biographical writing apply the designation to several different phenomena. In order to characterize the tenets of new biographical writing, the paper introduces the essence of the classical biography, which constitute a natural point of reference for the “new biography”. The latter emerged in 1918 with the English modernist Lytton Strachey, who opposed the fossilized Victorian tradition and its flagship model of panegyric biography. Strachey effected a breakthrough in European biographical writing, by creating biographies which demythicized their protagonists, approaching them with an ironic distance and highlighting the biographer within the narrative. His model would soon become a new standard in biographical writing. Another “new biography” discussed in the paper is the set of biography rules presented by Leon Edel in 1984, to which the originator refers as “New Biography”, a term he also applies to the biographies he authored. Still, Edel drew to a large extent on Strachey, attaching particular importance to the predisposition and talent of the biographer themselves. The latter’s contribution to a “new biography” consists chiefly in identifying and relating the “most profound” truths about the life of the protagonists, which provide a key to the understanding and narrative portrayal of their character and personality. The last of the biographical scholars discussed in the paper, Jo Burr Margadant, does not continue in the Stracheyan or Edelian spirit in her 2000 *The New Biography* but unfolds a novel, feminist perspective on biography, founded on the concept of multiple selves. She argues that that one’s identity is a kind of performance, and seeks that “new biography” in the narratives of life of eight eminent French female figures of the 18th century. Still, in the contemporary scholarly discourse relating to biographical writing, “new biography” is most often used as reference to the Stracheyan model, even though a century has passed since it was conceived. At the same, time, biofiction gains ever greater popularity in biographical writing today, being in my opinion the “new biography” of the postmodern era, which I demonstrate using a number of examples.

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