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Writing encounters: framing the use of fiction in biography

Abstract:

Debates involving history, fiction and ‘truth’ also arise in relation to biographical writing that employs fiction. One response may be through making (or reasserting) genre distinctions but this would seem to preserve the paradigm in which the tensions reside and which Virginia Woolf famously characterised as a choice between ‘truth as something of granitelike solidity and of personality as something of rainbowlike tangibility’ (Woolf 1958, 149).

My own recent work utilised the form of fictional biography to better explore and tell the story of its subject, Australia’s first woman aviator, Millicent Bryant. Though this approach is now more common as a means of portraying an actual life, it still confronts arguments about genre which demand the choice of *either* truth *or* personality, granite *or* rainbow: that biography must, in other words, be *either* a product of factual knowledge *or* risk losing its authority in becoming a literary form that can explore ‘personality’.

This paper revisits these arguments with the aim of considering other ways in which the use of fiction in biographical writing might be conceived and recognised. One way might be to see biography more broadly as a transformation that brings a life into being as ‘story’. This mode is ‘specifically human’ according to Hannah Arendt, who argues that a life becomes memorable by being narrated, establishing *bíos*, the manner and form of the life, as well as its factual substance, *zōē*.

Extending this is an approach developed from the work of philosopher Brian Birchall which focuses on the meaning of a life and argues that this is not to be ‘found’ or signified but ‘becomes’ in its being expressed and in being engaged with by the reader. Birchall’s re-vision of hermeneutics suggests the life is not merely to be accounted or recounted but *encountered*, and not in a particular form of story but through story as form in which the writer’s role is that of an intermediary. This framing allows the writer’s use of fiction in a biographical context to be articulated without recourse to genre distinctions or the separation of ‘granite’ and ‘rainbow’.

Biographical note:

James Vicars is currently finalising a doctoral project in the School of Arts at the University of New England in which he is writing the life of Australia's first woman aviator, Millicent Bryant, as fictional biography. He began writing professionally as a journalist and creatively as a poet and fiction writer in his midtwenties, and has been published in journals and anthologies. He has worked as a writer, teacher, editor, communicator, photographer and, more recently, writing mentor to school and university students. He received Writers' Fellowships from the NSW Ministry for the Arts and the Eleanor Dark Foundation in 2006 and 2011. His interests include contemporary fiction, poetry, biography, memoir, literary criticism, media and philosophy.

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Imaginative writing in the field of biography has raised similar theoretical challenges to those that have confronted history and led to the public skirmishes of recent years where, for example, the capacity of fiction to represent the historical past via the ‘empathetic imagination’ has been contested. Australian novelist Kate Grenville, in particular, found herself under fire from historians such as Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen following the publication of *The secret river* in 2005; Clendinnen’s criticism was particularly trenchant in rejecting the ‘empathetic imagination’ as a means of approaching the past (2006, 27). Many respected biographers have taken the same view: ‘[G]ood biographers don’t invent’, as Canadian historian Peter Waite bluntly put it (1983, 8). However, experiments with fiction in telling lives are rife, from Hilary Mantel’s prize-winning productions on the life of Thomas Cromwell (*Wolf Hall* 2009; *Bring up the bodies* 2012) and the stylish, biographical fictions of literary figures such as Henry James by Colm Tóibín (*The master* 2005) and David Lodge (*Author, author* 2004) to popular depictions of lesser-known figures such as early paleontologist Mary Anning by Tracy Chevalier (*Remarkable creatures* 2009) and literary hybrids such as Drusila Modjeska’s *Poppy* (1990) and Brian Matthews’ *Louisa* (1987). Even younger readers are catered for, with Pamela Freeman’s *The black dress: Mary MacKillop’s early years* (2010) winning the NSW History Prize for Young People.

The disclaimer of fiction usually avoids controversy of the kind Grenville experienced for suggesting she sought ‘a different way of understanding’ the past (Clendinnen 2006, 20), yet it would be strange if many, if not most, of the works above, and their like, were not incorporating some similar aim in their own portrayals of historical epochs or persons. Telling an individual life through fiction can also be a way of trying to overcome, under the disclaimer, the split that Virginia Woolf identified in her 1927 essay ‘The new biography’ (Woolf 1958). Reflecting on Sidney Lee’s assertion that the aim of biography should be ‘the truthful transmission of personality’, Woolf thought ‘no sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography’:

[o]n the one hand there is truth; on the other is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like tangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld the two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one. (Woolf 1958, 149)

Woolf’s elegantly phrased terms seem to challenge every new life story or work of biography to provide ‘one seamless whole’. Yet something welded will always have seams, arguing against the possibility of singular wholeness if a work straddles the borderlines of genre and discipline, or seeks to inhabit different sides simultaneously: for example, to be considered a variety of history or biography at the same time as being fiction. To the extent this opposition is based on binaries such as fact or fiction or Woolf’s ‘granite’ and ‘rainbow’, post-structural perspectives challenge the apparent solidity of such constructs; however, is there a logic which can draw these oppositions together or indicate a way to write the ‘whole’? To explore such questions, this paper revisits the arguments that separate granite and rainbow and then looks at alternative ways in which fictional writing in biographical contexts, in particular, might be conceived and recognised.

This is important to my own recent work, which utilises fictional biography to better explore and tell the story of its subject, Australia's first woman aviator, Millicent Bryant. This form is literally a biography in fiction, with the life being written as if it were a continuous fictional story but in which situations and dialogue that are invented only add to those that are not, and do not conflict with factual evidence. It is an approach perhaps most useful in the recreating of certain historical lives where the factual evidence is slim but it differs, according to Ina Schabert in her seminal monograph, *In quest of the other person: fiction as biography* (1990), from straight historical fiction in staying with the idiosyncratic course of that life rather than the demands of fiction *per se*. However, this difference can be quite nuanced and therefore easily lost; while it would not necessarily mean the fictional biography fails in approaching the truth of its subject, it could be argued that the difference between fiction that functions for its own fictional ends, for example, in a historical novel, and the fiction that seeks to be faithful in a biographic sense to the life in question, could become obscured. If the creation of a sense of the subject's inner life further blurs distinctions between what is fact and what is not, it would not be surprising for responses to such work, including my own, to fall back on the terms of *either granite or rainbow*, that is, whether the work is *either* aligned with factual knowledge *or* is a literary form that explores 'personality' but gives up its factual authority in doing so.

For a writer wishing to explore a life through more than one of these dimensions, this is where seams appear and threaten to split. The propositional approach of choosing and excluding *either* one mode *or* the other, in this case either historical evidence or imaginative insight, generates a rhetorical force that resists alternative ways of viewing the text. It also means genre boundaries are maintained – though so are the tensions arising from the 'absent' or excluded perspectives that threaten to rupture these boundaries.

The case of Kate Grenville's novel of settlement, *The secret river* (2005), provides a useful reference point here because the debates raised about history, imagination and the use of fiction can be applied, perhaps even more strongly, to biography. Writing in the *Quarterly essay* in 2006, historian Inga Clendinnen castigated Grenville and especially her comment during a radio interview that, while historians are wrestling with the facts, the novelist is able to 'stand on a step-ladder outside this and look down on the fray and say: "there is another way to understand this"' through empathy and imaginative understanding (2006, 19). Clendinnen takes Grenville to be claiming to know by this method with 'equal certainty' both what is intimated within the records, and what is beyond it, exposing, Clendinnen says, the gulf between 'doing history' and 'doing fiction'. She adds that 'we can't post ourselves back in time' nor can we put ourselves in the place of even 'those people we guess to approximate our own kind because that would condemn us to play Blind Man's Buff in a largely unintelligible world' (21). Working with facts relating to the 'actual' past is 'slow, always problematic' compared to what she calls the novelist's 'empathetic time leaps'; these are also self-referential by definition and represent a 'narrow cultural and temporal world' (21, 27).

Clendinnen does not explain why the difference between the two should relate to the speed of the research, or how the historian is any better able to escape their own

‘narrow cultural and temporal world’. Moreover, the ability to ‘post ourselves back in time’ is exactly what the imagination *is* free to do, even if the ‘actual’ past is inaccessible. Surprisingly, Clendinnen thinks it *can* be accessed by the method of ‘reconstructing as delicately, as comprehensively and as subtly as we are able, not only the material but also the cultural settings in which other people, once living, now dead, lived out their lives’ (27).

Unqualified though her assertion about accessing the past might be, it would, in any case, be hard to argue that historical novelists of the calibre of Peter Carey and Hilary Mantel do much less than Clendinnen seems to demand or, indeed, that Kate Grenville herself did not do painstaking research and examine both fact and context. What possibly makes Grenville different, however, is that she has said her fiction explicitly seeks ‘a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events’ as distinct from, presumably, pursuing purely creative ends (Clendinnen 2006, 20).

Fictional biography such as my own operates under similar premises, applying the equivalent of Grenville’s ‘different way ... of understanding’ to the lives of particular historic individuals (rather than living ones). A traditional or rigorously nonfiction biography, conversely, is assumed to tell the subject’s life from its factual detail and reasoned speculation based on this, avoiding imaginative elements. But even this approach cannot necessarily be relied upon, as Bernard Crick, a biographer of George Orwell, reflected on with a good deal of practical sagacity in relation to his own method of biographical ‘externality’ that tried to avoid characteristic ‘vices’ of the English biographical tradition such as ‘smoothing out or silently resolving contradictions in the evidence ... so elegantly that neither contradictions nor gaps in the evidence are apparent to any but scholarly eyes carefully reading the footnotes or cynically noting their lack’ (Crick 1981, xxiii). But even while seeking to avoid these problems, the limitations he accepts are also made plain: choosing to remain only with the ‘granite-like’ means personality may only be inferred from limited facts and not explored by other means. Thus, in the case of his biography of Orwell, the view it offers is authoritative and interesting but restricts itself to knowing *about* the man rather than *of* him.

Though Crick’s concerns now seem a little old-fashioned and are less conspicuous in contemporary nonfiction biography, they maintain the argument that it is not possible for biography to go further than facts about a person which can be generally agreed on. Thus, writing which utilises the imagination to evoke a ‘different way of understanding’, such as Tóibín and Lodge’s fictions about Henry James, is still excluded from the unqualified label ‘biography’ and forced to use the disclaimer of fiction. The ‘different way of understanding’, even when just as deeply rooted in fact and context, is turned aside into the generic space of fiction in which the biographical veracity achieved by these works – as well, presumably, as my own – might not be able to be acknowledged; this is the way genre boundaries block the recognition that particular fictions could possibly serve the purposes of biography (or history, in Grenville’s case). Yet to write fully *of* a person as well as *about* them, it is necessary to accept ‘rainbow’ as well as ‘granite’: there is a need, therefore, to find a means of viewing fictional biography, or the use of fictional writing in biography, which does

not force granite and rainbow apart, and which can encompass ‘a different way of understanding’.

Whether or not it can provide this means, post-structural theory throws out a particular challenge to the discourse that employs binaries such as granite/rainbow and fact/fiction. It also spotlights the normalisation that covertly accompanies such binary oppositions to make it appear that a choice between either one or the other is inevitable. It shows that the apparent oppositions tend to collapse the more closely their rhetorical devices and operations come under scrutiny: Derrida argues for a constant sliding between meanings and a plurality of differences in which opposites always bear traces of each other (Peck & Coyle 1993, 139). Rather than a fixed structure of language built on binaries, there is only an open-ended chain of signification and a play of differences, challenging the ‘given-ness’ of dichotomies based on the propositional ‘either/or’. Although it does not suggest that the reader or critic can say, literally, anything at all, the post-structural view undermines the possibility of absolute boundaries between, for example, fact and fiction, or fiction and biography. It does not abolish these significations, which retain their utility, but functions to neutralise their assumed authority to prevent other ways of understanding, to use Grenville’s term, from sitting alongside: the fictional, for instance, alongside the factual.

If this opens up the discourse, how could other modes or ways of understanding be described? One possible approach follows from the recognition that all biography is constituted as ‘story’. While this can be understood in the dictionary definition sense of a ‘narrative or tale recounting a series of events’ (Baldick 2008), it can be pointed out that there is no biography existing somewhere on its own without its being ‘storied’, or formed as narrative: without story in this sense, there is no biography. This perspective can encompass different biographical modes and approaches to the ‘other’, the person in whom we are ‘interested’. Hannah Arendt notes in *The human condition* that this term, from the Latin *inter esse*, signifies that which ‘lies between’ people and therefore can ‘relate and bind them together’ (Arendt 1989, 182); according to Julia Kristeva, Arendt also asserts that a life shared with others, that is, as story, characterises what is ‘specifically human’ and thus memorable, distinguishing *bíos*, the manner and form of a life, from its mere factual existence, *zōē* (Kristeva 2001, 7-8; Arendt 1989, 97). Taking this a step further, it could be suggested that *bíos* implicitly incorporates the ‘sense’ of *zōē* and that the two are united within, or as, story. As the writer’s act of bringing the two together, ‘story’ is the form that represents and articulates the *inter esse*, what ‘lies between’ the subject person and the reader, the ‘other’ and ‘self’, in biographical writing.

A way of extending this approach, as well as encompassing the ‘storying’ of biography beyond distinctions of fact or fiction, may be drawn from what the late Australian philosopher Brian Birchall called the ‘becoming’ of meaning, a way in which ‘self’ (as writer or reader) could not only relate *vis-à-vis* the ‘other’ (the subject person) but with the coming-to-be of biography as a journey, not just a written product.

This is because, for Birchall, ‘becoming’ does not merely denote ‘*an* experience’, another case of the particular, but stands for the realisation of *meaning*. He articulates this in a metaphoric ‘re-vision’ of hermeneutics that might apply to any engagement with a text but which has particular resonances with the present discussion of factual and fictional modes in biographical writing. Hermeneutics typically refers to methods of interpreting texts but, in one of his philosophical ‘sketches’, Birchall (re)turns to the origin of the term in the name of the mythological Olympian god, Hermes. He explains that one of Hermes’ functions was to lead the dead to the underworld; thus

[a]s the guide between the two worlds, he [Hermes] acted as an inter-mediary; an inter-mediary between life and death ... Hermes was a symbol of what brought life and death, being and not-being, together... Hermes must be, in other words, a symbol of becoming, for it is only becoming that is able to bridge the gap between the two worlds. (Birchall 1987, 552)

Likewise, we could say the biographical writer, in attempting to cross the threshold of time and space and evoke an experience of an other person’s life, ‘become[s] Hermes, not in the literal but the metaphorical sense ...’ as Birchall puts it, an intermediary who brings together *not-being* – that is, an original experience or person that is in some sense removed – with *being*: he or she who is living in the present, such as a potential reader (552). Thus, the writer, conceived as an intermediary, is inviting the reader to undertake a similar journey by entering the space of the imagination (in which a particular place and time may be evoked) and thereby approaching the other, the character or subject of the biographical work.

Fictional biographies, arguably, can make this invitation to the reader more strongly than nonfiction biographies because theirs is an explicit invitation to enter an imaginative experience of the subject person. Critically, though, this is not to provide its meaning as a ‘thing’ which can be given, ready-made, or consumed by the reader who, to go beyond what is signified or denoted about the subject, undertakes their own metaphoric journey – which is, Birchall asserts, the *becoming* of meaning.

This is an understanding that, differently from the poststructural view, sets aside the binary oppositions in which we have seen ideas of biographical writing become ensnared. On one hand, the distinctions of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, or ‘truth’ and ‘imagination’, are required for normal, analytic thinking; this is what Birchall distinguishes as the modality of reference, in which we refer ‘to’ things that can be signified, such as ‘fact’ or objective knowledge which either *is* or *is not* the case. The difficulty, as Birchall argues, is that this mode, reference, does not – and cannot – encompass meaning. Why not? Because he asserts that meaning is not something that can be *signified* or which is ‘out there’ to be found in the world (just as ‘the’ biographical account of a life is not out ‘there’). For example, we cannot speak of the meaning of love or time or a person’s life in the modality of reference, because this is not something that can be signified or denoted. Instead, according to Birchall, we must undertake a phenomenological ‘shift’ to the modality of meaning, utilising what Heidegger called the hermeneutic ‘as’ (as distinct from the apophantic ‘as’ of assertion, which concerns itself with the ‘present-at-hand’) in order to reach out to ‘a totality of involvements’ (Heidegger 1962, 200-01). As Birchall puts it

Meaningful content ... does not take the form of the proposition whose truth is independent of its meaning, but takes the form of the concept or conceiving, whose meaning becomes its truth ... [thus] we *conceive (think) Truth as One*. We do not *perceive or observe that Truth is One*. (Birchall c 1991, 2)

Using these terms we can say that a biographical work, in so far as it refers to factual knowledge about the person, is conveying referential 'meanings'. This is necessary to know the context of family, work, social relationships, education, the person's achievements and significant life events. By contrast, non-referential meaning cannot be signified and is not 'content' that can be 'incorporated' into the work but 'becomes' inseparable from the writing's articulation of the life as form, whether in nonfiction or fictional biography. In reviewing or criticising the work, we can refer to it and describe what it 'means' in various ways but this is not to reproduce that work's own meaning; rather, we are creating meaning anew in a separate act, that is, *as* our reading or review. Meaning, therefore, comes not in the words or literal content but through the metaphoric journey of each person in the reading (as well as in the writing) of a work.

This parallels philosopher Paul Ricoeur's argument that the configuration of a work is refigured in the act of reading. According to Hibbard, this collaboration is made possible by 'the writer's and reader's shared notions of language and time (represented through narrative). In a similar fashion, a subject's life is refigured and given definition by the biographer.' Ricoeur, he says, argues that

the meaning-making activity is characterized by interaction, not independent activity. Both the writer and the reader exert thought and effort as they put the story together. 'Plotting,' he [Ricoeur] writes, 'is the work of the text and the reader jointly'. (Hibbard 2006, 33)

Perhaps dialectically, this evokes the writer or text as the intermediary of Birchall's hermeneutic re-visioning as well as the reader's journey towards the subject.

This provides a means by which nonfiction or referential biography and fictional biography can share common ground. In my own practice, for example, it was freeing to realise that I could conceive of my use of fiction as creating a pathway for the reader to engage with both the actual facts of Millicent Bryant's life and the accretions I had imagined. I also saw that bringing my factual research and personal, subjective understanding of Millicent together in fiction paralleled my role as intermediary, inviting *being* in the person of the reader to come together with *not-being*, the person of Millicent Bryant.

The foregoing offer possible ways of conceiving how writing that aims for fiction's 'different way of understanding' can understand itself other than through genre distinctions. The telling of a life can be appraised in terms of the understanding or meaning the reader realises, or which 'becomes' when taking up the writer's invitation to make our own journey towards the life of the subject. This perhaps makes it clearer that a view of biography which is to encompass the contemporary diversity of biographical works (including alternative ways of telling lives, such as fictional biography) should not leave one mode, nonfiction, to stand generically for all biography. Rather than seeking to maintain borderlines around what can be

considered some essential version of the latter, or attempting to keep distinctions such as ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ apart, it may be more useful to recognise ‘a different way of understanding’ and the biographical life, rather than being *either granite or rainbow-like*, as a journey of meaning.

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