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'Storying' lives: biography as story and the ethical imagining and 'holding' of lives

Abstract

With questions of 'truth' and 'imagination' continuing to confront biography as a genre, this paper seeks to foreground recognition of the role of 'story' and the ethical imagining and 'holding' of subjects in biography.

It argues that the telling of a life requires its forming as 'story', a process that is necessarily creative and which, especially when fictional elements are incorporated, can also deepen understanding of issues of authenticity, genre and authorship. Its creation or composition as story is argued to occur irrespective of the style of the biographical writing; more specifically, story provides a framework for choosing and arranging all kinds of content, from facts to factual gaps and silences. It is the means of grasping, holistically, the movement of the life in question and, in this way, treating it justly and humanely – ethically. In this process, elements such as facts are mediated as stories, or parts of stories of the life of a person, indicating that not only does biography require story but the two are inseparable: without story, there is no biography.

However, questions of authenticity can arise when 'story', as the process of relating, is conflated with fiction. Is a particular story of a life, or a story within it, to be believed? It might conversely be argued that facts themselves are only stories with a certain status, stories that are taken to be 'true' and no longer questioned, but invoking binaries such as fact vs fiction does not guarantee greater biographical understanding or richness. If, however, the biographical work is held as 'story' and allowed to move in an imaginative space instead of taking truth and imagination to be opposite poles – one or the other – a more authentic faceting of the life in question may be produced.

Biographical note

James Vicars is a doctoral candidate in the School of Arts at the University of New England. He is writing a biographical account of the life of Australia's first woman aviator, Millicent Bryant, and aims to articulate a discussion of the importance of story and the role of the imagination in biography. His interests include contemporary fiction and poetry, biography and memoir, literary criticism, communication and media studies and philosophy.

Key words

Biography – Genre – Story – Narrative – Fiction – Fact – Poetics – Imagination – Life writing – Ethics

It is difficult to think of a modern literary genre which attracts the approbation biography does, nor one where the critical tone can be so emphatic. Nearly fifty years ago, Leon Edel, renowned for his biography of Henry James, observed with reasoned angst that even if a biographer pursues an 'objective' or 'scientific' approach '[i]n the end, he arrives at a work that is an image of an image of himself, and of his identifications and distortions' (Edel 1962: 228). In a more recent expression of unease, Nigel Hamilton asserted that while biography has become, in the West, the dominant area of broadcasting and non-fiction publishing, from television to the internet, 'it is now one of the embattled front lines in the struggle between society's notions of truth and imagination' (Hamilton 2007: 3)

These comments illustrate the continuing arguments about what biography does and doesn't do, as well as warning writers who introduce imaginative elements into biographical writing that they do so at their peril. But they also reflect, on one hand, a confidence that the distinctions of 'truth' and 'imagination', or 'fact' and 'fiction', can be maintained in the struggle Hamilton writes of, and, on the other, what Catherine O'Rawe (2006, p.994) characterises as an anxiety about biography's legitimacy as a literary form – partly deriving, she suggests, from its lack of a poetics, a body of theoretical knowledge which would support and validate it. This view is echoed by such luminaries as Richard Holmes (2002), biographer of Shelley and Robert Louis Stevenson, who claims 'biography has no serious poetics, no set of post-Aristotelian regulations' (8) and Robert Skidelsky (1988), biographer of Oswald Mosley and Maynard Keynes, who adds that 'biography is still not taken seriously as literature, as history, or as a cogent intellectual exercise' (2).

Perhaps this is no wonder, as experiments with 'truth' and 'imagination' continue unabated. These range from the stylish, biographical fictions of literary figures such as Henry James (Colm Tóibín's *The master* (2005) and David Lodge's *Author, author* (2004)) and Sylvia Path (Kate Moses' *Wintering* (2003) and Emma Tennant's *Sylvia and Ted* (2001)) to popular depictions of lesser known figures such as early paleontologist Mary Anning (Tracy Chevalier's *Remarkable creatures* (2009)) and Australian-born pianist Noël Mewton-Wood (Sonia Orchard's *The virtuoso* (2009)). Other antipodean examples include Drusila Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990) and John Rickard's *A family romance: the Deakins at home* (1996), with Marele Day more extensively imagining 'the Captain's Wife' in *Mrs Cook* (2002). Even young adults are catered for with such offerings as Phillip Pullman's fictionalised biography, *The Good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ* (2010) and *The black dress: Mary MacKillop's early years* (2010) by Pamela Freeman, which won the NSW History Prize for Young People. With this tide of imaginative biography and life writing threatening simply to swamp distinctions of 'truth' and 'imagination' it might seem more relevant to fall back to questions of genre and whether, for instance, the possible forms of biography aren't simply far broader than traditionally imagined.

But allowing that questions of 'truth' and 'imagination' (and their apparent opposition) can be sidelined in this sense does not force them from the field; the ongoing critical commentary indicates that they remain close to the centre of the generic expectations of biography. While the *Oxford English dictionary's* linking of 'life' and 'writing' as the basic elements of a definition of biography (Murray 1933)

suggests a breadth of possibility, Hamilton argues that its coinage in the late seventeenth century limited broader notions of biography in the West by equating it with the written records of particular human lives. This, he asserts, 'narrowed rather expanded the public notion of life depiction' and was, for scholars of biography, 'disastrous':

Instead of becoming, like 'history' or 'art' or 'literature,' a premier domain of the humanities and sciences, 'biography'—with its newly restricted boundary, encompassing only written, documentary records of human lives—seemed insufficiently substantial or scientific to merit study or teaching (Hamilton 2007: 3).

If Western conceptions of biography thus became tethered to documentary records, it follows that such records, themselves, became privileged as sources of the knowledge about a life – and even *as* 'the knowledge' itself. However, knowledge so conceived is not only limited by the types of documentary records available but reified, taking on a 'fixedness' along with an authority – that of 'fact' – which excludes or marginalises knowledge in other forms. It is unsurprising, then, that biography was drawn more into the orbit of history and why expectations that depictions of lives be document (or historically)-based therefore remain embedded to the present day. But when these 'embedded' expectations are viewed against the wider field of biographical practice represented in contemporary publishing, it is apparent they now share this field with a range of other ideas about how lives can be told. These have arisen from a multitude of works (such as those cited earlier) which have used new styles and creative modes of telling, thereby expanding what counts as knowledge about lives and making hard and fast distinctions of 'truth' and 'imagination' appear limited if not simplistic.

Such considerations arose during my own exploration of the little known life of Millicent Bryant (1878–1927), Australia's first licensed woman pilot. With Millicent having died nearly eighty years ago and her sons likewise (albeit more recently), the opportunity of gaining first hand knowledge had itself passed away. Although many useful primary and secondary sources have come to light, their depth and breadth is very varied, leaving large gaps in knowledge about the recorded events of her life let alone its more personal dimensions. Thus, while the array of available factual details is wider than first supposed, it is clear that an account of her life defined simply by the presence or absence of such material would be wholly inadequate, if not absurd.

Moreover, it is apparent that factual incompleteness is not merely inescapable in biography but the norm: a paradigm which equates biographical richness with accumulation would be (ironically) incomplete. This is not least because the material taken to be 'fact' is, as noted above, fixed: it cannot move, nor provide 'motion'. To put it in the converse, why is it that factual gaps don't make biography impossible? The answer is that the telling or relating of a life not only provides the motion but circumvents fragmentation; it parallels our sense of 'flow', of the continuous quality of our experience of living. There are, after all, no blank pages in a printed biography, nor lengthy silences in an audio book equivalent. This does not mean that factual gaps don't exist, just that they are integrated into the narrative in the same way as facts, becoming features of the narrative rather than interrupting it.

A car journey might be analogous, for two reasons. From beginning and end points chosen by the biographer (and not necessarily corresponding with the subject's beginning or end), one travels through different landscapes which represent his or her view of the life in question, in the 'vehicle' of the narrative. Certain features of the terrain might be agreed upon, and used by other biographers, but the route and choices of vantage point will always be different. Although it will never *be* the life of the person in question, the biographer's skill may sometimes convince us not merely that the view is real but that we are sharing something of the subject's experience. On one hand, this illustrates that biographical materials can be combined and composed in a variety of ways; there is no single pathway which can be followed or prescribed. But at a more fundamental level, however, it reflects a forming and trans-forming process – a *poïesis* – both intentional and creative, which is the bringing of a biography into being *as* 'story'.

To return briefly to the *OED*, story comes from *estorie* and the Latin *historia* (Murray 1933) and in contemporary terms is 'any narrative or tale recounting a series of events' (Baldick 2008). Sharing the same roots as 'history', it is relevant to note the *OED*'s survey of 'story' covers a variety of current usages: not only historical events but recitals purely for entertainment and even deliberate lies. The sense of the term is intertwined with that of 'narrative', a 'telling' or 'relating' of events (Baldick 2008); while one is often substituted for the other (Julia Kristeva (2001), for example, considers 'narrating' to be an activity that is specifically human), 'story' is preferred here for its wider connotations, its simultaneous sense of completeness and potential which goes beyond *what* is narrated, told or recounted. It is taken to be the essence of knowing and telling or relating, and to stand for the process as a whole. While 'story' does not, of course, specifically belong to the writing of a life more than to other events or ideas which can be related, it is still fundamental to biography. This is because there is no biography existing somewhere on its own without its being formed or narrated. Biography is the result of 'storying': without story, there is no biography.

Seeing this clearly might assist biographers recognise their own writing process and that it can be more fully explored. A richer understanding of the role of story and that of the imagination (even in primarily 'factual' biography) may provide an extra means by which writers can draw on their 'holding' of the biographical subject – the overall understanding of, and attitude they have towards, the subject at a personal level, both consciously and unconsciously, which underlies and informs their work. This subjective 'holding' might include the person and their story in embryonic form, in a way which is perhaps broader but still a counterpart to the story of the person which also 'awaits', embryonically, in the more 'objective' facts of their life.

In 'storying' a life into being, biographical writing is necessarily creative: the life is created, *as* story, from what is accepted as shared knowledge and from what is held personally. Storying thus mediates factual as well as non and quasi-factual knowledge the writer holds, including speculations, rumour, unconscious biases and conscious judgments, gossip, explanatory stories, instincts and even silences, gaps and more distant contextual information which may still relate to the person; it both makes sense of and *forms* this material, something which neither facts or other elements are

capable of doing on their own. It might be characterised as a form of dialectic in which storying stands for the sublation of thesis (objective knowledge) and antithesis (subjective knowledge) into a new form which incorporates but transcends both. Sartre's biographical method, which is in succession analytic and synthetic ('regressive' and 'progressive') in order to effect a 'totalization' (*totalisation*) of the different, general and particular kinds of knowledge of the person, illustrates one way this can be articulated (Schabert 1990: 13).

It might be objected that, in this process, facts are being accorded the same status as what is imagined (ie fiction) followed by the demand that only facts should be used in portraying an actual, 'real' life. In return, it could be argued that facts are themselves only stories, constructs with a certain assumed authority or texts constructed from various discourses, as Foucault might put it. Moreover, Sartre identifies the need to avoid the risk that, while one has to understand the person's milieu, historical setting and so on, the individual must not be reduced to an explanation of his or her circumstances (Schabert 1990: 12); this is particularly relevant when the incompleteness of accepted facts, when taken as an account of those circumstances, is acknowledged. While facts are still essential, 'storying', in its mediation and placement of them (as well as other knowledge and insights held by the writer) in the writing a life, shows *how* essential they are.

Of course, at the same time as rendering facts and other content sensible, and providing opportunities for meaning, 'storying' in a biographical context will be incorporating any kind of 'point' aimed at by the teller, transparently or otherwise. Undertaking a biographical project is a subjective and personal choice; as Nancy Stein notes, 'the goals [of the teller of a story] are as varied as those which underlie human behaviour' (Stein 1982: 491) – a reminder that, besides the characteristics referred to here, notions of 'story' do not arrive innocent of the connotations of discourses of family, society, gender, power, criticism etc. With this caveat, the creating or composing of story occurs irrespective of the style of the biographical writing, from the highly factual to the highly speculative. It even applies to experimental works or writing in which the reader might not experience a conventional biographical 'flow' – such as in Brian Matthews' *Louisa* (1987), for example, with its multiple narrative personas. However, because the necessity of drawing together and forming the elements of a life is always present, story, in whatever form, provides the paradigm for choosing and mediating all kinds of content, from facts to factual gaps. It is the very means by which the biographer grasps the shape and movement of the life in question and by which he or she can consciously write it into being more fully and, hence, justly and humanely – ethically.

It is a *sine qua non* that the biographer/narrator wishes to do this and, if so, that she or he must be acting in good faith in relation to the subject to realise such potential. In this regard, a conscious and reflective awareness by writers of their own agency in 'storying' could extend awareness on many levels – eg logically, emotionally, philosophically, as well as ethically – of how they are 'holding' and telling their subject's life. Although a writer can create a biography without consciously involving themselves in the notion of story, not doing so could limit awareness of what is being formed in the biographical account and lead to a less ethically aware or responsible

result. Conversely, a stronger sense that she or he is involved in a process of 'story', and of the nature of their own 'telling', might help a writer perceive hitherto unstated motives in their work, or biases they might perhaps have been attributing to qualities in the source material.

In short, this richer awareness of story should be able to offer biographers an additional perspective on their own stance as story creators and authors; it also recognises that fictional or imaginative elements in biography need not diminish authenticity but can help the writer to more holistically relate, and nuance, the life in question. An example of how this can function in 'mainstream' biographical practice is provided in a chapter of Susan Tridgell's (2004) comprehensively argued study of biography where she compares the treatments, in different biographies of Bertrand Russell, of Russell's daughter Lucy's suicide. Tridgell's concern is with questions of sympathy and justice, and she points to the way Ray Monk's 'haunting, poetic description', in particular, 'conveys this tragedy far more powerfully' (Tridgell 2004: 184). It could be said this achievement has resulted both from Monk's subjective 'holding' [my usage] of Lucy's life and his 'telling' of this incident using dramatic/empathetic description, close focus and a shift in point of view to achieve its effect alongside the known (and chosen) facts. In so doing it approaches, as Tridgell puts it, Hardy's ideal for 'the story of each individual to be fully "known"' (Tridgell 2004: 184). In fact, the very power of this description has an impact on the overall depiction of Russell, highlighting the creative nature of Monk's vision and distinguishing his from other biographies of Russell. This makes it obvious that no two biographies will ever be the same, even if the facts at their disposal happened to be – and that there is no single account of a life existing somewhere, reified by facts (or anything else): biography *is* story, and also stor-ies.

This returns us to the borderlines and questions considered earlier, such as those invoked by the idea of biography employing imaginative or fictional elements: 'Is a particular story of a life, or a story within it, therefore able to be believed?' or so the question might go. However, it is not clear that anyone other than the reader, in their own interrogation of the story, should ultimately take responsibility for this answer. It may yield a simple or complex judgment but, as Maureen Ramsden points out, '[t]he world around us is interpreted in terms of a story ... [and] ... all discursive paradigms, including factual and fictional histories, owe their existence to a basic element of construction or poesis' (Ramsden 2011: 356). From this standpoint it is inevitable that other than purely factual considerations also contribute to biographical works. To begin with, the relating of any single incident – what happened – involves its creation as story. Secondly, it is not possible to say that the choices, approaches and minor conclusions brought to a biographical construction, as well as its style and tone, are not subjectively or imaginatively produced; thirdly, explicitly fictional content may, as a way of relating the biographer's 'holding' of the subject, also have an important place in the full and authentic telling of a life. Thus, given skilful and ethically aware 'storying', imagination has a vital role in helping to reveal, or bear, the truth of that life.

Examples of the conscious and creative use of story in biography abound, and include writers (such as those mentioned previously) who have used fictional elements, forms

of imaginative narration or, as in my own case, fiction in concert with historical research to explore and tell the life of their subject. Recognition of the importance of story and imaginative 'telling' in biography is also emphasised by the literary values which Tridgell (2004) attributes (as earlier noted) to Monk's biography of Bertrand Russell: it is these which seem able – and are perhaps required – to evoke the possible impact his daughter's tragic death might have had on Russell. Another example of these values, where they lie closer to biographical fiction, might be in Peter Robb's *M, a biography of European painter Caravaggio* (1998), joint winner of the National Biography Award. While the book is not without critics, among them art scholars and those who deplored the 'irritating' renaming of the artist counter to the usual convention (Canning 2000), another reviewer indicates the power of Robb's imaginative approach by his ability to create 'the everyday atmosphere of palazzos and tennis courts; their air of indolence and danger; the street corner subcultures of a world in which beauty and brutality, the grotesque and the exquisite, rubbed cheek to cheek.' (Culturecrammer 2009) 'Painting' around Caravaggio in this way, Robb merges a partly-known, partly imagined world with the mostly unrecorded and thus explicitly imagined day-to-day actions and feelings of his subject. A risky but vital aspect of this storying, which itself helps to prevent the confinement of his subject between historical facts, is the use of a suitably grungy, twentieth-century vernacular to give his portrayal of Caravaggio an authentic, 'breathing' presence.

Monk's (1996, 1997, 2001) portrayal of Russell also avoids such confinement, though structured and storied differently. However, what both these examples expose is biographical writing's ability – and need – to occupy an imaginative space in which it is possible to overcome notions of fact and fiction as opposite poles, where only one kind of approach or the other is allowed. Instead, understanding and creating biography as 'story' makes possible more 'alive' and possibly more empathetic (and perhaps authentic) portraiture. Questions of 'truth' and 'imagination' (or fact and fiction) can, then, *stay* sidelined: the examples above suggest that invoking them as opposites is not the way to greater biographical understanding, richness, or authenticity. That these notions are not, as it were, forced from the field, is, arguably, because they are implicitly present as formative considerations in biographical projects – particularly when writers more deeply understand their own forming of biography as 'story'.

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