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Created Lives: The Evolution of Literary Biography

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The danger when discussing evolution, in any field, is to imagine that it is a linear process—a teleology. In this paper, I will discuss the developments, and new forms, which have appeared in the genre of literary biography over the past half-century. However, anyone who takes the *Times Literary Supplement* or *London Review of Books*, or who has browsed the shelves of Waterstones—the UK's leading bookseller—recently, will be aware that documentary biography, in a form that has not changed significantly since Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, remains dominant.[1] We must think in terms of what the palaeontologist Yoel Rak calls the "Star Wars Bar" theory of evolution (McKie 38-67)—that Neanderthals and documentary biographers exist alongside Homo sapiens and New Journalists, until the Darwinian fitness of one or other ceases to be sufficient and that species, or form, becomes extinct.

I will begin by examining the form of documentary biography in the twentieth century, and as it stands today. I will then describe the problems that have become apparent with the documentary form, and explore the new forms which have arisen in response. These will include the 'New Journalism' of Richard Holmes and Janet Malcolm, the metabiographies of Julian Barnes and Antonia Byatt, and also works where the biographical subject is represented through fictionalisation. I will argue that the latter method is now the most appropriate for literary biography. When those who write literature cannot be unaware of the theoretical developments of the past half-century, specifically poststructuralism, it makes no sense for literary biographers to feign ignorance.

Biographers of the period immediately prior to the birth of poststructuralism, such as the great Flaubert scholar Francis Steegmuller, and David Magarshack—who gave us the first decent English-language work on Chekhov—wrote with an understated authority that was particularly readable, reminiscent of an elderly academic digressing into anecdote. Magarshack renders Chekhov's deathbed scene, in *Chekhov: A Life*, as follows:

[1] Izaak Walton wrote a life of John Donne as early as 1640. John Aubrey, Samuel Johnson, and William Godwin all wrote 'lives' of literary figures, but it was James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) that established the form, leading to its enormous popularity in the nineteenth century.

> The doctor […] ordered some champagne. Chekhov took the glass, turned to Olga and said with a smile, 'It's a long time since I drank champagne.' He had a few sips and fell back on the pillows. Soon he began to ramble. 'Has the sailor gone? Which sailor?' He was apparently thinking of the Russo-Japanese war. That went on for several minutes. His last words were: 'I'm dying'; then in a very low voice to the doctor in German: 'Ich sterbe.' His pulse was getting weaker. He sat doubled up on his bed, propped up by pillows. Suddenly, without uttering a sound, he fell sideways. He was dead. His face looked very young, contented and almost happy. The doctor went away. A fresh breeze blew into the room, bringing with it the smell of newly mown hay. The sun was rising slowly from behind the woods. Outside, the birds began to stir and twitter, and in the room the silence was broken by the loud buzzing of a huge black moth, which was whirling round and round the electric light, and by the soft sobbing of Olga Knipper as she leaned with her head against Chekhov's body. (387-388)

Donald Rayfield, writing in his 1998 biography, *Anton Chekhov: A Life*, did not feel at liberty to describe the scene in such detail:

> German and Russian medical etiquette dictated that a doctor at a colleague's deathbed, when all hope was gone, should offer champagne. Schworer felt Anton's pulse and ordered a bottle. Anton sat up and loudly proclaimed 'Ich Sterbe' (I'm dying). He drank, murmured 'I haven't had champagne for a long time,' lay down on his left side, as he always had with Olga, and died without a murmur before she could reach the other side of the bed. (595-596)

This brevity is at odds with the fact that Rayfield's biography has a significantly higher word count than Magarshack's, and was marketed as "the definitive biography of Chekhov."[2] The reason for this can perhaps be understood if we look to a further Chekhov biography, published in the same year as Rayfield's—*Chekhov: The Hidden Ground*, by Philip Callow. Callow's rendition of the deathbed scene is even more colourful and detailed than Magarshack's. I will not quote Callow here, as this paper is not a comparison of every Chekhov deathbed scene ever written. If it were, it would resemble a chapter of Janet Malcolm's *Reading Chekhov*, where we are presented with eleven accounts of that scene before reaching Callow's. Malcolm's purpose is to show that there is no documentary support for the details which Callow adds, rather that he has lifted them from the Raymond Carver short story "Errand". Malcolm can feel pleased with herself for presenting such a painstaking demolition of Callow's authority as a biographer, but she misses the point that Callow's narrative, like Magarshack's—whom she also reprimands for "fictionalizations"—is simply more interesting, more Chekhovian, than Rayfield's.

[2] Michael Frayn's review, quoted on the front cover of the book.

Malcolm's point also rests on the idea that there is an authoritative account of the scene to choose over Callow's or Magarshack's, be it Rayfield's or the eye-witness account of Chekhov's wife, which is the primary source for Rayfield and other biographers. Chekhov's wife, Olga Knipper, was an actress, and her account of the deathbed scene grew more colourful each time she retold it. The buzzing moth mentioned by Magarshack originates in one of Knipper's later expansions on the scene, yet this detail reads very much like something that Chekhov would have written. His stories are filled with *unheimlich* sounds, like the buzzing, and the moth is also reminiscent of the shark which looms at the end of his story "Gusev".

When there can be such diverse renderings of a scene that was of public interest at the time, and which two out of three eyewitnesses have written about, it is easy to understand how some critics level the charge of fraud at documentary biography. "Biographical writing is very often indeed a species of confidence trick—in spite of its continual claim to be rooted in documentary evidence", writes John Worthen in his essay "The Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer" (240). Worthen understands that biographers are necessarily ignorant of all but a tiny fraction of their subjects' lives. It is, of course, impossible to fully comprehend another's life. Biographers only ever have limited materials to work with. However, Worthen, as a documentary biographer himself, recognises the desire to present a cohesive narrative. He knows that in order to do so, the documentary biographer must manipulate the limited materials at his disposal into an apparent string of cause and effect, leading to a seemingly inevitable conclusion. He compares this to writing a detective novel, where you know the denouement that you wish to reach, and contrive the events which lead there, laying the evidence out for your protagonist and your reader. Worthen continues:

> What contemporary biography primarily creates, I suggest, is not only fiction (which has often been said) but a particularly escapist and uninteresting kind of fiction. The created lives within most contemporary literary biographies, in fact, make television soap operas look minor miracles of complexity. (241)

Worthen cites Claire Tomalin as having presented a solution to the problem of biography, in her dual work on Dickens and Ellen Ternan. Tomalin's technique is not without its own problems:

> It seems *probable* that Nelly became pregnant by Dickens and he moved her to France, *probably* somewhere in the Paris area; that she had her baby there, with her mother in attendance, *some* time in 1862; and that the baby died, *probably* during the summer of 1863. (qtd. in Worthen 241, emphasis added)

This indecisiveness succeeds only in undermining the reader's belief, and therefore his interest, in the narrative. Yet Tomalin is not alone in its use. The distinguished critic Stephen Greenblatt employs a similar technique in his 2004 Shakespeare biography, *Will in the World.* It drew the criticism of Terry Eagleton, who commented that it "overdoes the subjunctive mood, laced as it is from end to end with 'might have beens', 'could well haves' and 'almost certainlys'" (48). Worthen offers a further solution, to eliminate the problem of utilising the subjunctive within the biographical narrative itself: "'Some or all of this may be wrong.' I suggest that those words might usefully be affixed to all literary biographies, as a kind of Government Health Warning" (242). Given that many books, television dramas, and films, utilise the statement "based on a true story", or similar, as a device to lead their audience to invest a greater depth of emotion, it is logical to assume that Worthen's inversion would have the opposite effect—again undermining the reader's belief.

Yet the documentary form lingers on in literary biography, either sounding unsure of itself, or in some cases, as with James Shapiro's recent *1599: A Year in The Life of William Shakespeare*, departing further from the readable into Gradgrind-style 'factual' detail. Other times, in a self-conscious effort to bolster the now-questionable authority of their authors, publishers use thicker paper, more spacing, larger type, and even single-column indexes, as though the 'Truth' of a biography can be measured from the book's size and weight. This all attests to the fact that it is now widely recognised that biography is a genre in crisis.

"Invention formed a love match with Truth," Richard Holmes writes cheerily in a 1995 essay entitled "Biography: Inventing the Truth". As he continues, "The result was a brilliant, bastard form […] which has been causing trouble ever since" (15). Holmes' pioneering book *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* was published ten years earlier, to critical acclaim. It is a clever meld of autobiography, travel writing, and biographical work on several Romantic figures. It works very well, acknowledging that the moment of time, and the context in which we read literature, have just as much effect on our understanding of what we read, as anything we may know about the author and his situation. Janet Malcolm employs a similar technique in *Reading Chekhov*, and it can be seen as part of the New Journalism trend fostered by the *New Yorker* magazine, with which she is associated.

As fresh as *Footsteps* might have seemed two decades ago, and as useful as this form may be to a journalistic writer such as Janet Malcolm—who wishes to produce a

commuter-friendly work with a light word count, and without the need for any original academic input—it is really still just Holmes' love match between Invention and Truth, with the addition of some cross-dressing and the occasional *ménage-à-trois* with the Author. Despite the adornments, the raison d'être of these books is still to tell us something about their subjects, and neither Holmes nor Malcolm entirely avoid biographical detail in doing so. Holmes' style is enjoyable, and allows him to convey his enthusiasm for his subjects more easily than a conventional documentary biography. Therefore, the New Journalistic form has been a valuable part of the evolution of literary biography. However, Malcolm's 2001 effort serves only to confuse. She attacks Philip Callow for appropriating biographical details from Raymond Carver's fiction, but offers no explanation as to how her own anecdotes of encounters with brash Russian tour guides add anything greater to our understanding of Chekhov.

Phineas G. Nanson, the deconstruction-weary narrator of A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*, shares Richard Holmes' view on biography's dubious heritage, but is less enthusiastic about the form generally:

> I had always considered biography a bastard form, a dilettante pursuit. Tales told by those incapable of true invention, simple stories for those incapable of true critical insight. Distractions constructed by amateurs for lady readers who would never grapple with *The Waves* or *The Years* but liked to feel they had an intimate acquaintance with the Woolfs and with Bloomsbury […] a gossipy form. (5)

Byatt has stated that *The Biographer's Tale* was written as a response to *The Peppered Moth*, a novel by her sister—Margaret Drabble—about their mother. Nanson sets out to write a biography of a biographer, piecing together unpublished fragments of his subject's work on an apparent triple biography of Henrik Ibsen, Carolus Linnaeus, and Francis Galton. Through Nanson's frustrated efforts, Byatt articulates the impossibility of biography. She was provoked into doing so by the fact that Drabble's fictionalised mother in *The Peppered Moth* did not resemble the mother whom Byatt remembered. *The Biographer's Tale* isn't the first biography about biography (or, metabiography). Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, published in 1984, begins by offering three chronologies of Flaubert's life, each differing substantially, but each assembled from documentary evidence which could be legitimately utilised in a documentary biography. Geoffrey Braithwaite, Nanson's Barnesian predecessor, has a similarly frustrating experience, unable even to decide which of two stuffed parrots had

sat upon Flaubert's desk during the writing of his story "Un Coeur Simple", which featured a character with a pet parrot.

Flaubert's Parrot presents a convincing case against the documentary form of literary biography, but as I have already mentioned, the form has not disappeared. *The Biographer's Tale*, published sixteen years later, presents the same case. Neither offers a viable solution with which literary biography would be able to move forward, and this remains the situation today. Nanson's comment that biography is "a gossipy form" for those who wish to read about a writer without having to read that writer, suggests that if we want to know an artist, we should know him through his art. As admirable as this position would be, it ignores our human curiosity about others. People have always loved to gossip, and will probably continue to do so. When one has enjoyed a particularly moving work of art, it is natural to wonder what in the artist's life gave him an insight that we ourselves lack. In Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Odette is asking Swann about art and culture: "As for Vermeer of Delft, she asked if he had ever suffered because of a woman, if it was a woman who had inspired him, and when Swann admitted to her that no one knew anything about that, she lost interest in the painter" (243-244).

Had Swann read Tracy Chevalier's 1999 novel *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, he would have had a story to tell Odette which, apocryphal or not, might have provoked her further interest in Vermeer and his work. Chevalier's story does not stifle alternative narratives about Vermeer; nor does it cripple the audience's belief in it through use of the subjunctive, or absurd disclaimers.

If it is the task of literary biography to increase our enjoyment of texts by providing insight and commentary, it is my argument that fictionalisation achieves this more successfully, and more honestly, than any documentary work. In her essay "Secondary Lives: Biography in Context", Catherine Peters, showing a critical awareness rare among biographers, writes:

> Modern critical theory, we know, is scornful of the idea that the text can be related to its author's life in any useful or significant way […] If we accept this, literary biography must either be demoted to a pretentious variant of tabloid muck-raking; or become a work of art in its own right, with the question of objective truth to the facts of the subject's life becoming secondary to the art of the biographer. (44)

Peters is correct that, after the critical war that was waged around the "Intentional Fallacy"[3], it would be naïve in the extreme to make the statement, for example, that "Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is about the bard's forbidden love affair with Viola De Lesseps", no matter what evidence we had of such an affair taking place during the writing of the play. However, those of us who have enjoyed Tom Stoppard's play *Shakespeare in Love* cannot deny that it contributed positively to the cultural matrix through which we receive *Romeo and Juliet*. This is the Darwinian advantage of fictionalisation, which I hope will see it grow and prosper. Fictionalisation adds to the mythologies immediately surrounding an artist and his work, but leaves space for further additions and mythologising. Documentary biographies cannot coexist peacefully with their rivals.

In my second-hand copy of Magarshack's *Chekhov: A Life*, next to a passage detailing Chekhov's "love" for a woman called Lidia Avilova, the previous owner has scribbled "dear, dear, how Magarshack must regret this after Simmons". Ernest J. Simmons wrote a biography of Chekhov a decade after Magarshack, in which his research revealed that Chekhov's relationship with Avilova had mostly been an invention on her part. Simmons displaced Magarshack. Since 1998, Simmons and all the other documentary biographers who have worked on Chekhov have been displaced by Donald Rayfield. In time, Rayfield will be displaced by another scholar. Janet Malcolm undermined Philip Callow, but has herself been displaced by Michael Pennington, whose *Are You There Crocodile?* also uses the New Journalism technique on Chekhov, but with more original thought than Malcolm. The only biographical work on Chekhov which will not wane is Raymond Carver's short story "Errand" as, even if another fictionalisation appears, it will not 'disprove' Carver's.

According to Steegmuller, Flaubert took a similar position to that of Catherine Peters:

> God knows how scrupulous I am in the way of consulting documents and books, collecting information, etc. Well I consider all that very secondary and inferior. Material truth or what is called that should be but a springboard, to raise one to something higher. (Steegmuller 230-231)

Yet, the freedom of fictionalisation does not allow one to say just anything. As Virginia Woolf rightly pointed out, "If [the biographer] carries the use of fiction too far, so that

[3] See William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1954). In their essay, Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that authorial intention is neither accessible nor relevant to the objective criticism of literature. See also Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of*

he disregards the truth […] he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact" (231). It is a case of adding to a mythology, and the biographer employing the methodology of fictionalisation must demonstrate his awareness of the pre-existing myths. Readers have expectations, and again it does not matter if these are apocryphal or not—if they are not satisfied, it will undermine the reader's belief in the narrative. It is likely that someone approaching a biography of Anton Chekhov will expect to read about a nineteenth-century Russian writer. Unless the biographer wishes to make a very elaborate comparative point, it would not be appropriate for him to write about an eighteenth-century Swedish botanist.

Chekhov was famously a physician as well as a literary man. He therefore had a very good understanding of the conflict between Scientism's need for fact, and the Romantic tendency towards interpretation. He wrote the following in a letter to a friend from medical school:

> One of the conditions of creative art is that it cannot always accord completely with scientific facts; a death from poisoning cannot be portrayed on stage exactly as it occurs in reality. But even within the conventions there should always be a sense of correspondence with the facts, by which I mean that the reader or spectator should clearly be aware that it is a convention, and that the author genuinely knows what he is about. (Bartlett 426)

Provided that literary biographers heed this maxim when they compose fictionalisations, I believe that the form will prosper and eventually relegate documentary biography to an anorak pursuit, quite deserving of Nanson's scorn. After all, we study literature for the very reason that the characters in Chekhov, Flaubert, and Shakespeare, seem real and alive to us. Literary biography should not stop short of breathing the same life into its subjects. In a decade's time, the Shakespeares of Greenblatt and Shapiro will be forgotten. I believe that Stoppard's Shakespeare will be remembered.

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