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‘Welcome creative subversions’: a survey of experiment and innovation in recent
biographical writing

Abstract:

While biography is popularly understood as a literature that tells straightforward, factual life stories, biography as a literary form has been, and continues to be, the site of considerable experimentation. Focusing on experimental biographical practice, and its reception by reviewers, this survey considers a range of current writers and their work, mapping their experimentation and, where relevant, their consideration of this practice, against the background of innovation achieved in biographical writing during the twentieth century. This includes a case study of Andrew Motion’s *Wainwright the Poisoner* (2000) to illustrate the form and craft of biographical innovation, including the practical, theoretical and methodological issues involved for writers in this field. This survey supplements the considerable scholarly engagement with this topic since the second half of the twentieth century with a perspective that is focused on both authors’ production and its reception.

Keywords

Creative writing – Biography – Life writing – Literary innovation and experimentation

Imagination is as much the biographer's right and duty as the novelist's – Michael Olmert (2000: C8)

Introduction

More than thirty years ago, biographer and literary critic Leon Edel eloquently expressed the central puzzle of writing biography, writing that “every life takes its own form and a biographer must find the ideal and unique literary form that will express it” (qtd. in Novarr 1986: 165). This declaration came at a particularly fertile time of biographical enquiry when, after decades of practice-led experimentation into innovative forms of biographical writing by writers who pushed, and tested, the boundaries of this particular form of writing – investigating the parameters of the form, as well as the theoretical, methodological and ethical issues involved in writing biographical texts – scholars began to take note of what these authors had achieved.

Of particular interest to contemporary biographers is the enduring paradoxical situation that although biography has been, and remains, the site of considerable formal experimentation, it is widely understood by readers as a literature that tells straightforward, factual life stories of its subjects (Pearsall 1998: 175). Focusing on recent experimental biographical practice, this survey considers a range of contemporary biographers and their work to map their experimentation against the background of innovation achieved in biographical writing during the twentieth century, together with how their ‘boundary testing’ has been received by reviewers.

Biographical innovation: a brief historical review

As contemporary biographers do not work in isolation from the history of their field, it is of interest to briefly consider the significant innovation achieved in biography during the twentieth century. Histories of biography note how Edmund Gosse's landmark *Father and Son* (1907) moved from Victorian hagiography to focus on the private lives and fallibility of its subjects, and Lytton Strachey's revolutionary *Eminent Victorians* (1918) ushered in a number of key features of modern biography – “candour; irony and satire ... the techniques of fiction and Freudian psychology; and beauty of language and design” (Cline and Angier 2010: 57). Experiments followed by well-known biographers including Virginia Woolf in landmark works such as *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933), who in 1927 wrote that “the biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life” (Woolf 1927: 155). The imaginative, bestselling and award-winning, but today much lesser known, American biographer Catherine Drinker Bowen, who wrote from the 1930s to early 1970s, asserted the necessity of biographical narrative not following “that straight line that leads to some neat historical or moralistic pole ... and ends up in the sterile part of history” (ctd. in Kort 2007: 29). By 1930, the significance of such innovation was recognised by prolific English biographer Hesketh Pearson in his *Ventilations: Being Biographical Asides*, in his declaration regarding an aspect of

biographical practice that continues to grip both biographers and those commenting on that work – truth in biography. Pearson stressed the role of invention in biography almost to the point of rehearsing post-modern denials of the possibility of any absolute truth when he clearly stated the case from the biographer’s point of view: “the finest biographer can only tell the truth as he sees it, and the probability is that it will not be the truth as other people see it” (1930: 85) [1].

Edel’s five volume life of Henry James (1953-72), Richard Ellman’s *James Joyce* (1959) and George Painter’s *Marcel Proust* (2 volumes, 1959 and 1963) followed in the immediate post-war period, detailed and beautifully written volumes which drew new insights from close research into the psychology of their subjects. Following on from biographical work by Sigmund Freud (on Leonardo da Vinci, 1910), which sought to understand the biographical subject through the application of psychological theories and approaches, has led to works classified under the term ‘psychobiography’ although this classification came much later (Runyan 1982, Schultz 2005) and both the technique and its results were, and are still, contested (Elms 1994, Alfonso & Eckardt 2005, Fouché et al. 2005, Bahun 2012). In 1973, Norman Mailer wrote *Marilyn*, which although conceived as a collection of photographs with a brief introduction by the writer, instead evolved into a self-reflective examination of not only Monroe’s life, but also the mythology surrounding her, this narrative supported by the now-familiar images. Mailer utilised his novelist’s skills to make psychobiographical sense of his subject, his aim, he stated, to provide “a literary hypothesis of a *possible* Marilyn Monroe who might fit most of the facts available” (qtd. in Novarr 1986: 161). Mailer’s approach was criticised – especially in relation to his perfunctory references to Monroe’s movies and reviewers attacked his egotism on the basis that some of the most engaging material in this biography comes when the author’s own experience approached most closely, and personally, that of his subject. The harshest scorn was, however, reserved for Mailer’s recreations of his subject’s thoughts and motivations, when he used, in Woolf’s terms, his well-developed “novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life” (1927: 155). [2]

The 1970s was a particularly fertile decade for in terms of stylistic innovation in biographical writing. Martin Duberman’s *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (1972), a study of an educational-artistic community, eschewed biography’s usual linear chronological narrative progression and also inserted a fictionalised version of the author into the narrative, a literary strategy that presaged Edmund Morris’ controversial fabrication in *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (1999) by almost thirty years (see Brien 2002). In 1974, British historian Norman Hampson’s ingenious *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* was structured as a dialogue between the historian narrator and three modern fictional figures – a government official, a Communist party member and a Church of England minister – who argue revealingly about the interpretation of the meagre facts available about Robespierre’s life. Such an approach followed logically from such earlier innovation as Frank Walker’s biography of famed Italian composer, *The Man Verdi* (1962), in which Walker builds up a picture of Verdi by portraying his personal relationships including with his benefactor and father-in-law, pupils, librettist and others. Walker himself noted this was a “biographical experiment”

(1962: xi). In *Lewis Carroll: Une Vie* (1974), Jean Gattégno constructed Carroll's life through a series of thirty-seven biographical essays arranged alphabetically by thematic title.

Following such innovative practice and post-structuralist declarations that all writing was construction and invention, in 1984 Ira Nadel asked "To what extent is fact necessary in a biography?" (5), summarising what some of these previous biographers had asserted thought their work (if not articulated) – the necessity to sometimes manipulate aspects of the factual record in order to make important psychological or artistic points. This notion climaxed in Pierre Bourdieu's essay 'The Biographical Illusion' (1984), which posited that the very idea of writing a coherent story of a coherent life was nonsensical. Michel Foucault had foreshadowed this position in his *I, Pierre Riviere* (1975), which attempted to expose the process by which biographies are shaped and filtered through their authors' subjectivities. Following these and other discussions about biography, David Novarr's *Lines of Life: Theories of Biography, 1880-1970* (1986) provided not only a critical survey of the genre, but a framework that biographers, as well as readers, reviewers and scholars could use when discussing innovation. Such theoretically-informed approaches also led to articulated expectations that biographers accept the impossibility of objectivity, renounce narrative omnipotence and make their political, social, cultural and other motivations discernible in their texts. The effect of this on biographers can be seen in additional experimentation with form and content. This has been especially apparent in biographers asking readers to take a more active and conscious role in meaning-making in the biographies they consume. Gattégno's stated aim was, for instance, that readers would "gradually ... discover [Lewis Carroll] ... and so re-create him" (1974: 5), as they progressed through his essays.

The related trend of acknowledging biographers' limitations was exemplified in A.J.A. Symons' *The Quest for Corvo* (1940), which A.O.J. Cockshut called "the autobiography of a biographer" (1989: 8). Brian Matthews' critically acclaimed *Louisa* (1987) similarly highlighted the biographer's struggles and disappointments while attempting to narrate Louisa Lawson's story. This narrative device of author-as-character has continued to attract such biographers as Ian Hamilton (*In Search of J.D. Salinger* 1988) and Alan Close (*The Australian Love Letters of Raymond Chandler* 1995) but, as much of the criticism of Morris' *Dutch* suggested, such authorial self-acknowledgement can be seen by readers as self-important posturing and must be used with discretion (see, Brien 2002). When readers judge this strategy as successful, it is usually a case of biographers interrupting the biographical account in an attempt to render more apparent the nature of their research and how they are constructing those narratives, as in such works as Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (1990). Peter Stephen Jungk's *Franz Werfel: A Life in Prague, Vienna, and Hollywood* (1990) adds an italicised passage at the end of each chapter that identifies the gaps in his knowledge, areas he could not investigate, and his own estimates of his success in creating the subject and the time in which he lived. Richard Holmes' *Coleridge: Early Visions* (1990) uses footnotes to take this acknowledgement of the biographer's role one step further, "not to document or expand on the text ... [but] as a third point of view mediating between the subject and the biographer" (Rollyson 2007: 5). In *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D.H. Lawrence* (1997), Geoff Dyer carries

this trope to perhaps its fullest possible extent, writing a memoir about his failed attempt to write a biography of Lawrence – in the process producing a speculative biography of Lawrence, a form which had been rehearsed in Ellen Wilson’s recreation of artist Mary Cassatt’s emotional life in her *American Painter in Paris* (1971).

Biographers have also tested the efficacy of not only inserting reproductions of photographs, artworks, documents and other materials into their biographies as illustrations, but also using these pictorial images integral components of their narratives. Penelope Niven’s *Carl Sandburg: Adventures of a Poet* (2003), a brief biography intended for children, features illustrations by award-winning Marc Nadel to the point where Nadel’s contribution to the biography has been assessed to be “virtually as co-author” (Rollyson 2004: 60). Candace Fleming’s *Ben Franklin’s Almanac: Being a True Account of the Good Gentleman’s Life* (2003), another biography for young readers, is organised into a set of thematic areas that are each presented as a collage of snippets of Franklin’s prose plus etchings, sketches, cartoons and other primary documents, designed in homage to past almanacs. Culinary-related biographies often feature a collage of recipes, which may be used to open or conclude chapters or sections, as key content within them, as mini-chapters between them, or as a value-adding coda to the text (Brien 2011). Even prayers can provide a core component of the biographical text, as in David Robertson’s *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne* (2003), where this biographer concludes each chapter with questions reflecting on the life of an influential Scottish evangelical pastor and poet, and a suitable prayer.

The subject chosen for biographical study has also been a rich area of innovation. From Virginia Woolf’s *Flush: A Biography* (1933), a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning told through the life story of her pet cocker spaniel, the choice of *who* (or *what*) to write about has often been as experimental as *how* this life was written. This was particularly so for works classified as feminist biography, which emphasise the importance of both ordinary women’s life experience and narrating important, but hitherto hidden, lives. An early example is Diane Johnson’s National Book Award-nominated biography of Mary Ellen Meredith, wife of writer George Meredith and a poet in her own right, although she often published under her husband’s name (Brown 2002), *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives* (1972). Significant numbers of this type of ‘lesser lives’ biography followed and continue to be published. Biographies of life partnerships and other relationships are a related topic, as – for instance – in Nigel Nicolson’s *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973), which narrates his parents’ marriage from their individual points of view; Phyllis Rose’s *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (1983) about a series of unconventional marriages, Jane Welsh and Thomas Carlyle, Effie Gray and John Ruskin, Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill, Charles Dickens and Catherine Hogarth, and George Elliot and George Henry Lewes, only one of which was happy; and Katie Roiphe’s *Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles 1910-1939* (2007), which examines the unusual unions of Vera Brittain and George Catlin, Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murray, H.G. and Jane Wells, Elizabeth von Arnim and John Francis Russell, Clive and Vanessa Bell, Ottoline and Philip Morrell, and Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge. While unhappy marriages feature in many biographies, William Cash’s *The Third Woman: The Secret Passion that Inspired*

'The End of the Affair' (2000) is unusual, in that it melds a passionate relationship and its dissolution with the novel it inspired as the narrative core of a biographical study – in this case of Graham Greene.

The above does not purport to comprise a complete survey of past biographical innovation (and does not include technical innovations including in the digital realm) but is, rather, an attempt to indicate some of the range and extent of biographical experimentation up to the opening of this new century. The work of all these biographers, however, does display a recognition that biography is imprecise and limited by its very nature because, as Hayden White observes, the world that biographers write about, does not “present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles and ends” (1981: 23). Biographers, instead, understand that they construct stories from the data they collect, forcing the disordered and vast complexity of an actual life into a neat literary form and, importantly, that the life thus presented only appears life-like and, therefore, authentic to readers because they accept, and endorse, this literary convention. Most biographers, moreover, maintain that this narrative crafting does not compromise the value of their texts as biography. As Goodman writes:

Of course, we must distinguish falsehood and fiction from truth and fact; but we cannot, I am sure, do it on the ground that fiction is fabricated and fact found ... Recognition of multiple alternative world-versions betokens no policy of laissez-faire. Standards distinguishing right from wrong versions become, if anything, more rather than less important (1978: 107).

Recent British biography

Despite the acknowledgement of the creative construction of all narrative writing, debates continue over the validity of experiment and innovation in biography. Inevitably, perhaps, these debates repeat main threads of argument. The first positions biographical fact as being allied to truth, while any invention/innovation is, therefore, inevitably related to fiction and, therefore, falsity. The second is to ally conventional biographical forms and practices with ideas of ‘solid’ history, fact and truth (and ‘good’ biography), with the obvious correlation that any level of experimentation or innovation is understood as leading to falsity, manipulation, underhandedness and a degradation of the form.

An interesting exception to this way of thinking has been the warm reception of the work of a number of British narratively focused biographers – writers who include Peter Ackroyd, Victoria Glendinning, Michael Holroyd, Hilary Spurling and Andrew Motion, and who use a range of literary techniques in their work, yet still produce what a varied readership (largely) accepts as non-fiction biographies. Ackroyd, for instance, whose acclaimed novels slide between fact and invention to present an unconventional view of history, has also produced a series of technically innovative and equally admired biographies. In his above-mentioned biography of Charles Dickens, Ackroyd’s dramatised sequences were largely accepted by critics as providing additional, and valid, perspectives on Dickens’ life and work (see, for example, reviews by Lee, Lynn, Mysak,

and Ott, all 1991, and Klinkenborg, 1993). Ackroyd has stated that he considers all his prose – whether biography, poetry, fiction or criticism – simply as ‘writing’ and the result of the same creative impulse, and does not see biography and fiction as “separate activities”:

For me, they are part of the same undertaking ... simply aspects of the same process ... I don't think they are different genres ... Maybe they are for the reader, but for me they are not (qtd. in Onega 1996: 212-13).

Ackroyd's *London: The Biography* (2000) is the perfect amalgam of such genre-crossing ingenuity. As Andrew Holgate has written, this text is “history written by a novelist, passionate ... and impressionistic” (qtd. in Moss 2000b). Such impressionistic imagining does not, however, please all critics. Writing of Ackroyd's *The Life of Thomas More* (1998) for instance, Michael Glover felt the book “leaves us with the feeling that this time Ackroyd might have done better to leave his subject to the historians” (1998: 47). Biographer Michael Holroyd, whose work has also been criticised in these terms, has put forward a position for biography as *between* the genres of fiction and history, although acknowledging the discomfort that this can bring:

Between history and the novel lies biography, their unwanted offspring, which has brought a great embarrassment to them both. In the historian's view a biography is a kind of frogspawn – it takes ten thousand biographies to make one small history (2002: 8).

Wainwright the Poisoner (2000)

Andrew Motion's *Wainwright the Poisoner* (2000) provides a revealing case study in this context. The United Kingdom's Poet Laureate from 1999 to 2009, Motion is also known as a novelist, but has been most awarded for his biographies. After studying English at University College, Oxford, where W.H. Auden was one of his teachers (Crace 2005), Motion taught English at the University of Hull (1976-1980) at which time his first volume of poetry was published and he met poet Philip Larkin. Motion's first biography was a group biography, *The Lamberts: George, Constant and Kit* (1986), of three generations of a creative, but troubled, family. This biography was extremely well received, winning the Somerset Maugham Award, presented by the Society of Authors to the best writer or writers under the age of thirty-five (Society of Authors 2013). His second biography, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993), published almost a decade after he was appointed one of Larkin's literary executors following the poet's death in 1985, won the Whitbread Prize for Biography, fulfilling the criteria of not only being well written but also “enjoyable” reading (Costa Book Awards 2013). Motion's *Keats: A Biography* (1997) was more unevenly received by critics and readers. This was not, however, due to any of Motion's biographical strategies, but dependent instead mainly on the way Motion imaged his subject as far more actively engaged with his life and times than previous, more traditionally Romantic portraits – nursing his tubercular mother and brother, undertaking training to be a surgeon and participating in radical politics. Motion's close reading of Keats' letters was also both admired and disparaged.

After these three significant biographies, Motion cast his life of Thomas Griffiths Wainwright (1797-1847) as an openly fictionalised and, therefore, considerably

experimental biography. Wainewright is a fascinating subject – a painter and author who moved in famous circles (the friend of Blake, Byron, Keats, Hazlitt and Fuseli among others) but made significant financial gains each time his close relatives died in suspicious circumstances. Wainewright never admitted to murder, but circumstantial evidence (obvious motivation, possession of books on poison, and his special interest in the recently developed strychnine, which could not then be reliably detected at autopsy) led to his arrest, conviction (for forgery) and transportation for life to Van Diemen's Land in 1837. Wainewright died there a decade later after working on a chain gang, as a hospital orderly and, finally, as an artist, painting portraits.

In *Wainewright the Poisoner*, Motion utilises the available historical evidence together with his considerable knowledge of the Romantic period to concoct a Wainewright's 'confession' – a chronological, first-person autobiographical narrative, presented as if it was written by Wainewright himself shortly before his death. Motion breaks this narrative into twenty-one chapters, following each one with a series of detailed, in-text numbered, historical notes in the third-person, a structural framework which is as elucidating as it is elegant. In the confession, Motion has Wainewright present himself as blameless victim. He not only, however, insists on the truth of his narrative, but also voices an understanding of the limitations of the autobiographical enterprise:

I shall begin this confession by insisting on what a less sceptical age would accept without question. It is the truth. Not the whole truth (for such a thing is impossible), and not the only truth (ditto), but not a lie (3).

The cool-voiced biographer's notes which follow each instalment of the confession provide material which sometimes supports, but at others questions, 'Wainewright's' version of events, illustrating the way biographers locate and have to deal with contradictory evidence. Individual notes range in length from single sentences to short essays and comprise approximately a third of the text.

Although in his illuminating introductory essay – which is, in itself, a significant contribution to the literature on biographical innovation, and especially interesting as it is by a biographer considering the possibilities of the form – Motion asserts the commentary in the notes is not intended to "correct" the confession (xviii), it does sometimes refute Wainewright's narrative, bringing known facts to light and noting omissions and ambiguities. The notes also contain a detailed discussion of how the available evidence – the newspaper reports and legal records as well as Wainewright's own letters, private papers, literary publications, lengthy ticket-of-leave application, paintings and even a fictionalised account of his life that he published in 1825 [3] – is, in itself, often contradictory. This documentary record is also incomplete as most of his paintings, drawings and letters were destroyed or have been lost. Although a number of biographical studies of Wainewright have been produced for over a century – including both more traditionally non-fiction (Wilde 1889, Muriel 1942, Hodgman 1967) alongside fictional characterisations in works by authors as diverse as Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton and Hal Porter – Motion declares that many of these studies are untrustworthy. He, moreover, also discusses how speculation about Wainewright's crimes has become accepted fact principally because to these recreations (279-93).

Carl Rollyson has noted that when there have been repeated biographies of the same subject some biographers “begin to experiment with their form, knowing that the basic facts are now in the public domain” (2007: 6), and many reviewers appreciated Motion’s innovation. In the *Washington Times*, Lucy Moore wrote that she understood that Motion “clearly felt that neither straight biography nor pure fiction would do Wainwright’s complexities justice, and so he combined the two genres”, calling the result “stunning” (2000). *The Sunday Times* reviewer, John Carey, found that *Wainwright* was “brilliantly innovative, gripping, intricately researched” and thus able to do “justice to its subject at last” (qtd. in Moss 2000a), while Michael Spinella recognised that Motion had crafted “a fascinating tale as complex and compelling as if Wainwright himself had written it” (2000).

A number of critics notably remarked that the high level of innovation Motion employed did not decrease the texts’ value as biography, Brian Fallon, for instance, noting that it was a “genuine tour de force, and on a non-fictional level, a telling portrait of a strange, intriguing and repellant man” (2000). Alex Dick went further to suggest that Motion was trying to “reinvent biography” (2000), and Bill Kent called the work “a marvellous literary hybrid ... a subversive meditation on how, for a biographer, facts and speculation are really opposite sides of the same coin (2000). While Richard Freadman found Motion’s notes problematic and dislocating, noting that “Good biographies admit ambiguity; but this one produces a kind of irresolution, a disjunction between the ‘poisoner’s’ putative point of view and the biographer’s implicit claim to final authority, that I found ultimately unproductive” (2000: 7) – others felt that the tension between the confession and the notes created a space where readers could form their own impressions of Wainwright and even that the very ambiguity of the text was its strong point.

The openly fictionalised nature of the confession prompted some resistance to classifying Motion’s work as biography. Jonathan Bate wrote in the *Independent* that *Wainwright* was “a broken-backed compromise” (qtd. in Moss 2000a), Ben Winters called it “odd pseudo-biography” (2000), while Charles Saumarez Smith posited in the *Observer* that *Wainwright* fell “between the different literary requirements of fiction and of history” (qtd. in Moss 2000a). Overall, however, this criticism was mild compared with the virulence Morris’ fictionalised biography of Ronald Reagan had attracted when it was published the year before. Although some of this variance in reception was, no doubt, due to the difference in status of the biographical subjects – a long dead, relatively unknown English Romantic artist and convicted criminal who ended his days in the antipodes compared with a (then) living American ex-President – I believe it can also be understood as in large part due to the transparency with which Motion revealed his technique. Motion always clearly delineated inarguable fact from what was based on more disputable evidence and what was his own speculative invention. He described this in his foreword:

The great majority of scenes and encounters in the Confession, all the friendships, and all the main events, actually happened. Often ... I have used contemporary accounts, weaving them together with Wainwright’s own words to make a consecutive narrative. ... At other times, when no word from Wainwright survives

... I have used other people's accounts of such experiences, and let myself add things that are typical and appropriate (xviii).

The notes further clarified exactly which parts of the narrative fitted into which category.

Motion accepted that the voice he gave Wainewright was "a confection", but also argued that it was "one I would have tried to characterize by far more conventional means, had I decided to write a more familiar sort of biography" (xviii). Indeed, one of the strengths of Motion's work is the act of ventriloquy by which he creates a persuasively believable, as well as historically and culturally accurate, voice for his subject. Cast in credible Romantic period speech, this voice makes manifest Wainewright's erudition, energy and charm, as well as his vanity and callousness, with a vividness that many of the previous studies had not been able to do. It is largely through this voice (albeit fictionalised, but not wholly fictional – based as it is on historical evidence) that Motion is able to represent Wainewright as a complex human being, laudably achieving his biographical aim of "bringing him back to life as a plausible and dynamic force" (xviii).

Ventriloquising, or providing a believable voice for a historical character comes from the term 'literary ventriloquism' coined by David Lodge for how novelists create (and readers 'hear') the various voices in literary works (1987: 100). While biographies including, as Freedman has noted, Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) have effectively employed forms of biographical ventriloquism, it is more usually employed by fiction writers. Interestingly, when the technique is skilfully employed in fiction – as in Peter Carey's *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) – the resulting works are often perceived as much as historically-based biographies as works of the imagination. While Carey invented, and uses as the novels central conceit, the document of which Kelly biographers dream but which does not exist – an autobiographical account written by the bushranger – his fictionalised voice in this account is so credible that historians debated its authenticity. This was despite Carey making no claims for the historical accuracy of his work.

A number of reviewers found *Wainewright* so innovative that it questioned "the very nature of biography itself" (Kuritzky 2000). Motion supported such assertions with comments that he felt it was "high time that there was a proper well-ventilated conversation about what on earth biography thinks it's doing" (qtd. in Wagner 2000) and his statement in *Wainewright*'s foreword that he wanted to address "matters that biography normally only implies" (xix). While some thought such declarations dismissive of other significant innovation in biographical writing, they do not detract from Motion's powerful endorsement of the potential of fictionalising fact-based biography, as well as his awareness of the risks inherent in such experimentation. This was never obfuscating trickery for its own sake. Indeed, Motion has written that clarity is his goal: "I want my writing to be as clear as water. No ornate language; very few obvious tricks. I want readers to be able to see all the way down through its surfaces into the swamp" (qtd. in British Council 2011). This clarity always has one aim – that of providing a rich reading experience: "I want them [readers] to feel they're in a world they thought they knew, but which turns out to be stranger, more charged, more disturbed than they realised. In truth, creating this world is a more theatrical operation than the

writing admits (qtd. in British Council 2011). In *Wainwright*, Motion tested the boundaries of how theatrical biography could be.

Recent experimental biographies

For these reasons, I believe Motion's linked biographical portrait and reflection on biography in *Wainwright the Poisoner* was a milestone moment of high and successful experimentation in recent biographical writing. Other examples have built on both Motion's achievement, and those biographies that preceded it and, while there is not space here to survey this entire territory, a number of representative categories and some examples will be discussed below.

The surprise bestseller *Cod: The Biography of a Fish that Changed the World* (Kurlansky 1997) spawned a series of genre-stretching studies of non-human (and particularly food) subjects (see Brien 2010a), while biographies of place were also prominent at the end of the twentieth century. These included John Birmingham's *Leviathan: The Unauthorised Biography of Sydney* (1999), Eric Rolls' *Australia: A Biography* (2000) and Ackroyd's *London: The Biography* (2000). Some of these projects, Rolls' and Ackroyd's for instance, are monumental in scope and could be classified as histories in the Annales School style such as Le Roy Ladurie's epic *Montaillou* (1980). Others, such as Carola Hicks' acclaimed biographies of art objects, agree with Igor Kopytoff's assertion – following Arjun Appadurai's proposal that objects have lives and therefore possess their own biographies which need to be researched and expressed (1986) – that such inquiry can reveal not only information about the objects under consideration and the times in which they were used, but also much about such texts' readers, who examine their “cultural [...] aesthetic, historical, and even political” responses to these narratives while reading them (Kopytoff 1986: 67). Hicks' *The Bayeux Tapestry: The Life Story of a Masterpiece* (2006) traces the tapestry's manufacture and how it has been used and interpreted, *The King's Glass: A Story of Tudor Power and Secret Art* (2007) explains why the design of the windows of Cambridge's King's College Chapel altered during the decades of their manufacture due to political events, while the posthumously published *Girl in a Green Gown: The History and Mystery of the Arnolfini Portrait* (2011) relates the story surrounding the creation of, and subsequent history behind, Jan van Eyck's masterpiece. Researching and writing such biographies of otherwise inanimate parts of our world – an activity producing what are known as ‘object biographies’. This has produced studies of material cultural objects as diverse as M.G. Lord's biography of the Barbie doll (1994) alongside archeological and museum objects (Gosden and Marshall 1999), jewels (Saunders 1999) and restaurants (Brien 2010b), all of which start with an understanding of “the inextricable link between things and people by focusing on the meanings constructed around objects” (Langdon 2001: 580).

Recent literary-related biographical studies which, however, move well beyond the literature and lives of its authors to include analyses of popular culture include such volumes as Claire Harman's *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (2009), which uses a more conventional biographical study as the basis for an exploration of the ongoing revival of Austen's works in film and television adaptations, novelisations

and other productions, the way Austen has been portrayed in these reincarnations, and how her name has been used to sell a wide range of products. David Ellis' *Death and the Author: How D.H. Lawrence Died, and Was Remembered* – which he describes as an “experiment in biography” (2008: xii) – is a moving account of Lawrence's dying days and the fate of both his work and reputation after his death. Ellis, author of the well regarded third and final volume of the Cambridge biography, *D.H. Lawrence: Dying Game 1922-30* (1998), also includes a narrative account of his own research alongside a series of reflections on death and dying more generally in *Death and the Author*. These ruminations range from musings on changing attitudes to death and what it means to be terminally ill, as well as other matters as diverse as the role of religion in modern life and the consequences of dying intestate (without a will). Although Ellis always keeps Lawrence as the central narrative focus, the biography is also thus able to range widely across subject matter related to the end of Lawrence's life and, as Peter Balbert describes, the narrative “seamlessly radiates outward to connect with ... literature, theology, psychology, philosophy and medicine” (2009: 376). These aspects of the biography, and especially the medical aspects, including the descriptions of the tuberculosis Lawrence and other consumptive writers suffered at the time he died, and the sometimes horrifying 1920s treatments available, ensured this biography appealed to a broad readership. So much so, that the biography was reviewed in medical alongside literary publications including a very positive assessment in the *British Medical Journal* (Dalrymple 2008). Ellis' combination of focus: from the seemingly very narrow (Lawrence's dying and death) to wide (other topics relevant to this) produced, Balbert noted, a work that could be classified in multiple categories, “nothing less than a masterpiece of biography, intellectual history, and medical inquiry” (375). Reviewers generally agreed, finding the range of subject matter a strength of the work, and one that increased its significance (see, for example, Glendinning 2008, Poole 2008).

In writing *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2005), winner of the Whitbread Award for Biography in the year it was published, Alexander Masters drew on the approach of feminist and other such ‘lesser lives’ biography, as well as popular memoir, in profiling his friend, an activist who had been both homeless and a violent criminal. Masters has attested to the shortcomings he found in the traditional chronological structure of biographies beginning in childhood, reporting that he found this resulted in a text that was not only without any dramatic interest but which also did not mimetically reflect its subject: “It bored me to tears ... Stuart [Shorter] was the opposite of orderly: a chaotic, outrageous, alcoholic sociopath” (ctd. in Gilles 2009: 89). Masters credits his subject with proposing a solution: to structure the book “like a murder mystery”, starting near the end of the narrative, at the point when the biographer met his subject, and then mapping backwards to Shorter's childhood in order to explain not what had made him the man he then was, but “what murdered the boy” he had been (ctd. in Gilles 2009: 89). This deceptively simple narrative strategy was much praised, however it is relatively rare in both fiction and non-fiction. The complexity of such “retrograde” narrative (Genette 1983: 37) has been described by Ken Ireland as proffering “a range of unexpected and unconventional perspectives” (2010: 29). Such a narrative structure, by focusing on “how and why rather than what” engages readers imaginatively and intellectually, Ireland continues, “by supplying results before causes, sustaining curiosity when the later stages

of events are known, but exploiting the characters' relative ignorance of what lies ahead of them, and forcing readers to confront their own processes of response and memory, to make sense of material already presented" (29).

Apart from this unusual narrative strategy, Masters' text has also been praised for its inclusion of reproductions of drawings, photographs, newspaper articles and facsimile extracts from Shorter's diary. The diary entries are particularly revealing not only in terms of their content, but also for what the penmanship divulges of Shorter's state of mind (Nørgaard 2009: 148). Despite such richness in terms of structure and form, it is the choice of subject – one of Britain's underclass, a homeless man with many of the problems of that way of life (alcoholism, drug-addiction, crime, violence and, ultimately, suicide) – that was most lauded in reviews. Gary Morse, for instance, noted as the book's "greatest triumph" that it presents "an intimate, poignant, if often disturbing view of one homeless man in England ... in all of his complexities and contradictions, his strengths and weaknesses" (2007). The book was so illuminating in this regard that although not written specifically for psychologists or professionals of any discipline – or perhaps, precisely because it was not written with this audience of readers in mind – it has been identified as offering insights to a wide range of care workers. This includes:

researchers and practitioners in the area of homelessness, for community mental health providers, and for therapists who work with challenging-to-serve clients ... [the biography is] particularly illuminating for psychologists who serve clients with co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders, personality disorders, and history of childhood sexual abuse (Morse 2007).

Other recent innovative biographies seek to present, not previously unknown people, but known figures in new ways. Such studies include Frances Wilson's *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth* (2008), which focuses on the information in the subject's journals when she lived with her brother at Dove Cottage in Grasmere from 1799 to 1802, and Sally Cline's *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise* (2003), which argues that Zelda was an accomplished artist in her own right (a writer, dancer and painter) and her mental illness was largely a result of thwarted ambition and exploitation. Cline not only details the occasions her famous husband used her work without attribution (publishing a number of her stories under his name and including passages from her letters in his works) but also Zelda's distress regarding this appropriation.

Genre hybrids are another type of biographical experimentation which have become popular with readers over the past decade, and include the acclaimed and award-winning *Suspicious of Mr Whicher: Or the Murder at Road Hill House* (2008), in which author Kate Summerscale blends group biography with family history, and presents her biographical findings in the seductive style of the country-house murder mystery. In *Mrs Robinson's Disgrace* (2012), Summerscale blends biographical enquiry with many aspects of the romance novel, to narrate her diarist's biography alongside a rich cultural history of middle class Victorian Britain. The biographical memoir is another hybrid biographical form – where, like the study of Graham Greene built around a single of his more than thirty novels discussed above – the biographical narrative focuses around a specific element/theme or discrete part of the life in question. In this vein, Paula Byrne,

writing about her biography of Evelyn Waugh, *Mad World: Evelyn Waugh and the Secrets of Brideshead* (2010), which links events in the author's life to his famed novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), classifies this type of biographical narrative as "partial life" biography and states she is convinced it will be "the way of the future" (2010: 376). For Byrne this is not, however, a reductive either/or proposition asserting that "there will always be a place for the 'cradle to grave' biography. I think that the two [partial and more traditional full-life biographies] can happily co-exist" (376).

Conclusion: speculation and ongoing avenues of biographical experimentation

Paschalis Nikolaou judges that a softening of "definitional boundaries between fiction and life-writing [is creating] welcome creative subversions" (2006: 20), and there is evidence that biographies which openly veer into conjecture – particularly in terms of discussing private lives, thoughts, emotions and motivations – are attracting less negative criticism than they have in the past. The term 'speculative' was, for instance, used openly by Steven Scobie, author of a landmark critical study of Bob Dylan's work (1991), in the title of his book-length biographical poem, *And Forget My Name: A Speculative Biography of Bob Dylan* (1999). Focusing on the musician's early years, this self-described "imaginative and semi-fictional" work proclaims that while "details of places, names, and specific events are true ... it is the poet's interpretation [of these] that transforms the work from biography into art" (Scobie 1999: back cover). In this process of interpretation, Scobie speculates on his famous subject's emotions and motives to try to discover what he describes as the "deeper truth" under the surface of the facts about his early life (1999: back cover), and this attempt was favourably reviewed. Julia Blackburn's *Old Man Goya* (2002), an openly speculative biography of the artist's final years, mixes memoir and meditations on travel with highly personal responses to Goya's art, and has also been very positively received by both critics and readers. Highly speculative work like Paula Gunn Allen's *Pocohontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat* (2003) continues this trend as, while acknowledging the lack of evidence around the subject's life and her motivations, nevertheless Allen creates a well-rounded life for Pocohontas from what is available in active opposition to the "diet of true love, romance and talking cartoon animals" (Cooper 2005: 151) offered by popular culture representations. Allen also innovatively uses information gleaned from Native American oral history as source material, asserting the value of such evidence. Duncan Hamilton goes so far as to title his entertaining and surprisingly poignant speculative biography of a famed Victorian jewel thief, *The Unreliable Life of Harry the Valet* (2011), making clear that, despite his best efforts, the resulting narrative might include inaccuracies. This acknowledgement of limitation is indicated in the many (sub)titles of biography which include versions of "a life" or "a biography" – as had Virginia Woolf in her *Flush* and *Orlando* – signalling that the biographer in question knows he or she has offered one interpretation of the evidence, but there could (and perhaps, should) be other interpretations of this, and any other yet to-be-located, material.

Michael Holroyd's *A Book of Secrets: Illegitimate Daughters, Absent Fathers* (2010) is a further elaboration of current trends, blending speculative with partial life and group biography. Holroyd builds his narrative around a number of women whose life stories

from the nineteenth century the current day are linked though their connection to an ornate Italian villa. While reviewers praised this work as “a book of singular fascination” (Taylor 2010), “poignant” (Shilling 2010), “glowing” (Bakewell 2010) and “magical” (Appignanesi 2010), D.J. Taylor writing in *The Literary Review* honed in on Holroyd’s innovation, describing *A Book of Secrets* as “nothing less, in fact, than an attempt to mark out, and then gamely transgress, at least half-a-dozen boundaries that a previous generation of biographers would have hesitated to cross” (2010: 20). This positive reception was not only due to an appreciation of the elegance with which Holroyd wound his biographical findings together, but also to the eloquence of his exposition on biographical writing which he integrates into his text. Describing the book the result of a “long, interrupted quest” (2010: Acknowledgements), he acknowledges it is “not so much a traditional ‘biographical narrative’, as a set of thematically related stories” (230). Recognising the gaps in factual material that beleaguer all biographers, he eloquently writes, “Of necessity there are many empty spaces marking what has been hidden or forgotten. Lost or misunderstood – mysterious spaces, which have themselves become part of a recurring pattern in this recreation of their lives” (230).

This consciousness of deficiencies, and even at times the nonexistence, of biographical evidence has been one of the continuing inspirations for biographers in experimenting, and introducing innovation, into biographical writing for at least a century. By focusing on experimental biographical practice, and surveying a range of current writers and their work, mapping their experimentation against the background of innovation achieved in biographical writing during the twentieth century, this discussion has focussed on the practical, theoretical and methodological issues involved for writers in this field, and how this innovation has been received by reviewers. Carole Angier has recently asserted that “In biography’s house there are many mansions. As long as there are books, there will be room for us all” (in Cline and Angier 2010: 60). All writers and readers of innovative biography should hope so.

Endnotes

1. Pearson (1877-1964) is the author of a series of popular biographies (many still in print) including those on Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Conan Doyle, Benjamin Disraeli, and W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.
2. Over a quarter of a century later, Edmund Morris’ *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, 1999, received similar criticism. For a detailed discussion, see Brien 2002.
3. Wainwright’s fictionalised account of his life, titled *Some Passages In The Life Etc Of Egomet Bonmot, Esq, Edited By Mr Mwaughmair, And Now First Published By Me*, was published in *The London Magazine* in 1825, under his nom-de-plume, ‘Egomet Bonmot’.

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