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Art and Archetypes of Historical Biographies

By Birgitte Possing, DK

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The Biographical Turn and Democracy

Today, the historical biography has become an important public tool in understanding how historical and public personalities have had an impact in history. In the Western world, the market is overwhelmed by biographies, in entertainment, business, media, literature and history. We can explain this as an element of the individualistic or individualising zeitgeist following the demise of the Grand Narrative. The overwhelming presence of biography has rendered it a kind of compass for human life. We call it the biographical turn. This turn has not only happened because we live in a post-Freud world with an inclination to psycho-historical analysis. It has also happened because the decades around the turn of the millennium saw the biography becoming part of the democratic project in an increasingly globalised community. Biography expresses interest in the individual, and its place and agency in culture and society. Thus, we are talking about the biographical turn in history, meaning that it has become still more important to understand how and why historical biographies influence our understanding of history, present times and of the future.

The Biographical Truth?

The biographer's challenge is that the notion of biography encompasses more than a pure life depiction. It encompasses the events of a life, the narrative of a life, and the interpretation of its characteristics. And, the historical biography represents one of many ways of telling history. Furthermore, it is a genre with many possible narratives: We can understand, tell, criticize, praise and depict the life, uncover the myths and go behind the masks of a real person having lived and having left his or her mark in history. But which way of telling a life is right? Which way is wrong? Even though we are talking about the naked, the unmasked, the harsh, the pure, the real, the subjective or the ultimate truth that build on true knowledge, documentation and on archives, the making of a biography is not simple or easy. In 1939, Virginia Woolf complained: "How can one make a life out of six cardboard boxes full of tailors' bill, lovers' letters and old picture postcards?" This question has been and still is the central question for all biographers: Which sources, which

interpretation and which narratives are important and relevant in the making of a historical portrait in a biography?

It is the central question, but it is also a question that you can't answer in general terms. The nature of the answer depends on the agenda of the biographer, his/her access to archives and sources, and on the relation between the biographer and the protagonist.

We are not always equipped to take up this challenge. Because still, the biographical turn has not been followed by a well-developed critical tradition, and still, our institutions of higher education do not offer any specific training in the all-round study of biography. As expressed by the British historian Nigel Hamilton:

"Its ethics, like the history and theory behind it, thus go largely unaddressed, while at a practical level there are still relatively few courses offered to those who wish to write a biography, whether big or small. Would-be biographers are thus left largely to their own devices, scrabbling for advice and examples in every direction."

The result of this scrabbling around is that the actual protagonist of a biography, a deceased personality might be exposed to a non-professional biographical gameplay with his or her life, agency and reputation without being able to defend him- or herself, simply because he or she is dead. Despise this gameplay, though, I still see the cornucopia of biographies as a democratic element of history. Historical biographies fascinate and captive the general audience because they tell stories of human individualities. For the general audience, biography has become a kind of an Owners' Manual on how historical personalities have dealt with the challenges of life. And that is the reason why it is important to dive into the issue of multifarious biographical truths. What is documented history, and what is interpretation. What is reconstruction, and what is deconstruction.

In my forthcoming book, I am trying to trace *the interdisciplinary analytic field* of biographical studies. On the one hand we have the *genre*, this being the empirical narratives of individual lives as they can be read from Antiquity to the present days, and, on the other hand we have *the analytical field*, which this genre comprises, and which is the study of the genre, its theories, methodologies, narrative techniques, and its archetypes. With this distinction we are on the threshold of being able to identify concepts and classify archetypes of 'the making of biography'. The biographical field is by its very nature interdisciplinary, because a biography borders on many other genres, subjects and narrative traditions. I would like to argue that in the art of biography,

the building of bridges between archetypes, methodologies, and narrative techniques of biography is possible, despite differences between the disciplines of history, literature and social sciences, Let's have a look:

The Biographical Archetypes

A biography is the *depiction* of a life. It is a non-fiction life story of a real lived life, written by someone other than the central character. But it is more than a pure depiction of archival traces left behind: it is of course, *an interpretation* of life. A biography is always *a reconstruction* of at life, it is a *told* life. Deconstruction, reconstruction and narration are intertwined, and the old concepts of truth and lies, faction and fiction are questioned: "By means of biographical texts, it can be shown that there are other accounts, other individuals, and other truths than those which were formerly attributed credence" (Larsson, 2007). But the human narrative is like a piece of soap slipping out of your hand when grasping it. And that enigmatic slipping, too, makes it attractive and fascinating as a genre: We WANT to grasp and comprehend. The way in which lives have been told have varied wildly and changed over the years. Looking back over more than two thousand years from the Antiquity to present days, the genre has distilled a series of archetypes that all of them are present and vivid today. They can be conceptualised as follows:

The *didactic* biography, so termed because it serves as a mirror for magnificent human qualities (canonizing) or the opposite, wretched human characteristics (vulgarizing), as displayed by great army commanders, politicians, artists, sportsmen, or heads of state. The *hagiography*, a hero- or martyr epic, designed to glorify heroes or saints, irrespective of how the central characters lived their real lives. The opposite, the *villainography* is vivid and alive, too. More nuanced archetypes with the focus on the human characteristics rather than the context they live in can be written as: the *portrait of a personality* that focuses on the main characteristics of a nuanced, candid, and maybe ambiguous personality changing during his or her life time. Or as the template of the *Bildungsroman*, an *evolutionary development story*, so that the biographer creates an organised coherence in a (disorganised) life. As a more advanced biographical archetype, we find *the modern life story* allowing the interpretation of certain characteristics of the life and work of the protagonist, either as a *life-and-times* biography or as a *prism-biography*; the latter focusing on something else than the main character (a type, class, culture, gender). The most recent addition to the biographical archetypes is the *postmodern*, the *polyphonic* or *event-biography*, characterised by its breach with the traditional biography's chronology and coherence. An archetype in its own right is

the *prosopography*, or *collective biography*, about a group or a network of persons (e.g. farmers, nurses, authors of a distinct period or category). Every archetype is rooted in a historical period, every archetype has its own tools and methods, and every archetype has its own special relation to documentation and sources. Very rarely, the biographer makes a conscious choice between them. None the less, they are there. All archetypes exist today, side by side, and they tell quite different stories and truths about the same life.

What is the best, and the worst about knowing that? The worst thing is that most biographers are unaware of the archetype, its challenges and possibilities. We are, as biographers, more or less consciously writing ourselves into an archetype. In the Scandinavian countries, most academic biographers are doing *personality portraits*, *evolutionary development stories* or *life-and-times* biographies. While journalists tend to publish didactic, quickly written biographies having a rather abandoned relation to the 'man behind the mask'. One hundred years ago, Oscar Wilde wrote: "Formerly we used to canonize our heroes. Today we vulgarise them". This quotation still works today. Some biographers are tempted to create rather simple images of their protagonist as either being a hero or a villain. On the other hand, many biographers are publishing more ambiguous portraits of the protagonists. That is the best: that today, both the audience and most of the serious biographers are critical readers knowing that an historical biography is an interpretation, a representation rather than the whole, full and ultimate truth about a protagonist. The fastidious part of the general audience takes interest in the protagonists' longings, doubts, and rational as well as irrational behaviour and thinking. Once again, I see this as part of the democratic aim in a globalised society.

The Biographical Challenge

Many historical biographers make the chronological exposition of a life the controlling framework of the narrative. That is all very well given that a biography is about a physical life, which starts with birth and ends with death. But the idealistic idea of a coherent, chronologically advancing life was abandoned by 20th century pioneering biographers, with L Strachey and V Wolff in the lead, and followed up and confirmed by the French sociologist P Bourdieu, the American historian J Scott and the American philosopher J Butler at the end of the century. Few people's lives actually start on a course that holds for an entire lifetime.

Therefore, every biographer must decide on the relationship between chronology and the main idea with the biography being told (the plot). Since the turn of the millennium the biography has

served other purposes than straightforward chronological description of a life, given that modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries culturally liberated the individual: The historical biography has changed from an approach in history to becoming an inherently interdisciplinary and self-assertive genre calling itself the “new biography”. This has especially been influenced by feminists, postmodernists, race theorists, and advanced historical biographers, all of them having focused on the diversity and complexity of personalities, movements and institutions decrying “essentialism”:

“The subject of biography is no longer the coherent self but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves” (Margadent 2000).

Modernity created awareness that the individual person has had a choice, has had the possibility to lead many lives, having more than one identity. In the beginning of the nineties, we saw the first brilliant examples on this, say David Macey’s biography on Foucault: “Foucault lived many lives – as an academic, as a political activist, as a child, and as a lover of men”. Gilbert Badia’s biography on Clara Zetkin was another paradigmatic example of the complex art of biography, telling Zetkin with several identities as a political leader, a passionate rhetoric, a socialist, a feminist, a passionate lover, a mother, and an educator. Ambiguity, contradictions and biographical polyphony, have had pride of place for the genre during the last twenty to thirty years in the western world. But honestly, this is not merely a phenomenon invented by the modernists and the postmodernists of the 20th century. This understanding of one person’s multiple lives in reality goes all the way back to sixteenth-century Michel de Montaigne (1580) who in one of his essays wrote:

“People studying human activities always find themselves in troubles trying to understand these activities, because usually they seem so oddly self-contradictory that one shouldn’t believe it was possible”.

The nineteenth-century’s Francois-René de Chateaubriand (1839) claimed: “Man has not one and the same life. He has many lives placed end to end, and that is the cause of his misery”.

Both of them referred to the individual’s self-contradictory actions and many lives. Today on the other hand, historians are reclaiming a certain truth of an historical identity warning against the postmodernist dissolving of personalities (LW Banner 2009). And thus, we walk forth and back.

Despite this debate, the linear cradle-to-grave-convention weighs heavily in the idea of biographical research. The narrative resulting, at best, from this is that it went like it went, because that is how it went. This a priori determinism colours many biographical narratives: We find it

everywhere, also in brilliant biographies on famous men and women that deliberately show that their protagonists were focused, determined, goal-directed, and strong already before they could raise by own will and forces in the cradle. But that might be too much of direction to project into the life of your protagonist, just because he or she grew into fame as an adult. As in O Lange's *The Great Mogul*, mentioned in the book, *Biographies of the Financial World* (2012).

The Biographical Stance

The point is that the biographer takes a stand in relation to his or her protagonist. The technique required of the biographer is to find a stance as friend or adversary, mouthpiece or challenger. The biographical attitude has varied in the work of past biographers: In 1759, Samuel Johnson wrote: "He that writes the life of another is either his friend or his enemy, and wishes either to exalt or to aggravate his infamy." In the run of the 20th century this either-or position was abandoned. Now, it was seen as an obligation to criticise the protagonist sharply: "A man's biography should be written by an acute enemy" (Arthur Balfour). Or Oscar Wilde: "Formerly we used to canonize our heroes. Today we vulgarize them". A third position of empathy, wishing to explain both the bad and the good deeds of the protagonist – developed in the late 20th century (B W Cook 1984):

"Although there are many reasons to select a subject for study, including the need to understand the bestial and violent as well as the virtuous and noble, most biographers choose to write about people they care about and can identify with (...)."

Empathy and identification can also be seen as 'cold empathy', as Robert Gerwarth (2011) has argued in his brilliant biography on Reinhard Heydrich, the nazist with the "iron heart" (1904-42). This book could not have been written 20 years ago. Understanding and analysis should not be reduced to lies or truths. The truths are changing over time. In 1945, the Danish literary professor F B Jansen wrote:

"It is a necessity for the self-affirmation of any cultural society to rethink and re-write the understanding of its greatest personalities once or twice every century. Every generation has to take its stand, consciously, detailed and completely".

Thus, the perspective of the biographer has changed en route from Johnson to Balfour and Wilde to Wiesen Cook and Gerwarth. Some have written in order to scorn, rile or criticise their subject – others because they wish to revere and applaud their subject; or because they have fallen in love with their subject (!) Thus the basic positions in the lengthy western biographical tradition have flowed back and forth. In the twenty-first century we intend neither to canonise nor to vulgarise. Some do both. Others again try to stay sober, unbiased and open minded.

Personally, I prefer the last take. But the important thing for the biographer is to take a stand, realizing the archetype of the biography he/she is making. Otherwise the protagonist and his/her traces, evidences, remnants and reputations uncritically can take the lead in the making of the biography.

The Biographical Ethics

The making of a biography of a historical figure is a far bigger responsibility than any other kind of treatise. It is difficult dealing with the unwieldy ethical accountability vis-à-vis an increasing public pressure on the right to invade the private lives of famous personalities. This is also the case for academics. Whether we like it or not, every biographer is a *puppeteer for* and an *ethical judge of* the subject of the biography. The biographer is playing a pedagogic game with a real life, one that has actually been lived. Not much has been written about the ethics of the matter, even though it comes under hefty debate when the moral expectations of the readers are disrupted. The New Zealandian biographer, Michael King (2001) maintained that one should tread carefully when invading lives and private lives, whereas others, as the American biographer C Rollysson, found this “higher form of cannibalism” (2005) desirable. Others argue for both sides, as the British-American historian and biographer N Hamilton (2008). Personally, I follow King in that the documentary biographer has an ethical responsibility for the editing of the portrait. That is to say, and out of respect for the descendants, the critical biographer does not have the same freedom as a novelist creating a fictional character. As a biographer, having written more than 20 biographies, I do know that ethics are challenging and difficult to decide. My point is that the biographer is in a position to *make knowledge public* and to *keep knowledge private*. Taking a choice, making a decision.

In the Western world we have legal provisions for the protection of privacy; there are similar regulations applying to archive material. These protections and regulations being challenged more and more frequently, in printed and electronic media alike, we as scholars are challenged: Privacy is an awkward area for legislation because it has moved with modernity. The borderlines between what is considered private and what is considered public have moved radically during the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. How to cope with this issue? Should we reveal everything about our protagonists? Since the turn of the millennium, the general public expects nearly everything relating to sex, tenderness, solicitude and love to be made known. On the other the media and the general audience might see faith and religious affiliations, secret business and controversial political networks as belonging to the private sphere. Fifty years ago, the opposite

was true. Two thousand years ago, everything was in the public domain; for example, in the Roman historian Svetonius' biographies of *The Twelve Caesars* (69-122 BC; Graves transl. 1957), and of famous whores (!) went more than close to the intimate lives of these protagonists. If this revealing of intimate privacy has become politically correct today, we might have to be aware! With some justice, we can ask if our civilisation has progressed or regressed as regards what we should and want to know about the public personalities? We find no general answer to this question. The point is that the biographer holds the keys to the particular form of respect or disrespect for the subject that should radiate from the portrait.

The Biographical Gender

At present, and for my forthcoming book, I am doing an analysis on gender: The biographical genre displays a gender imbalance even more skewed than the well-known gender-distortion of history: An international study from 2001 verified that in the decade of the nineties more than 92% of all historical biographies (in the European nations and the USA) had dealt with male subjects, and 96% had been written by men. Thus, only 4% of all published biographies were written by women, while less than 8% of all biographies had women as the protagonists, for instance queens or feminists. During the last decade, these numbers have changed a bit in different ways depending on nation. But still, statesmen, kings, financiers, scientists, scholars and authors of the male sex populates the genre, even though female biographers during the last decade of the 20th and first decade of the 21st century paved their way with national and international women protagonists. This of course, was a result of the historical entry of females in formerly male dominated public positions during the 19th and the 20th centuries. Biographies of women scientists, pedagogues, politicians, authors, religious leaders and feminists followed by national dictionaries on female pioneers have contributed, and in some ways modernized the methodologies of the field. This rethinking of the field did not happen out of biological reasons, but because of the historical gender dissimilarities. Maternity, marriage and male opposition towards women conducting public power positions gave women more scrolled life courses than their male contemporaries. Today, the biographical efforts understanding this diversity in gender experiences, and the inclusion of women protagonists has made it meaningless to talk about the biographical genre as 'the science of man', as did the biographical Nestor Leon Edel (1957). Instead, we might name the genre the science of gendered individualities. I will return to the issue in my paper for a future meeting in ENTPB.

The Biographical Art – a Memo-list

As a conclusion for today's paper just this: The biographer is in the power position to de- and to reconstruct any life story. But archival documentation offers the possibilities of securing, not an objective, but a sober, unbiased approach to the truths, the myths and the lies of the protagonist. Thus, I will end this paper giving a banal, but necessary memo-list for the serious historical biographer that might not be afraid of facing the complex, fragmented, contradictive reality of his or her protagonist's life:

- Reading all literature (to understand and contextualise)
- Tracing all unpublished sources (to trace activities, thought patterns, doubts, longings, visions of the protagonist)
- Conducting interviews or contrasting sources/stories with other sources (to create the nerve or drama of the biographical story)
- Deciding on archetype and biographical stance (to help understanding the aim of the biography)
- Finding the plot of the biography (to make the biography attractive to the general audience)

Enjoy yourself and thank you!

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