

# Biofiction and Writers' Afterlives



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Edited by

Bethany Layne

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For the inaugural class of Postmodernist Biofiction,  
who reminded me why I became an academic.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: BIOFICTION AND WRITERS' AFTERLIVES

BETHANY LAYNE

'I hope each of us owns the facts of his or her own life.' So wrote Ted Hughes in a letter to *The Guardian* regarding the repeated removal of his family name from Sylvia Plath's grave (Hughes, 1989, n.pag.). Incensed by the respective claims of feminists, biographers, and literary critics to lay claim to those facts, Hughes would, no doubt, have been horrified by their subsequent appropriation in biographical fiction, in texts such as Kate Moses's *Wintering* (2003), and *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001), the latter doubly outrageous for being penned by his sometime mistress Emma Tennant. Yet such productions are not simply the latest eccentricities of what Hughes dubbed the 'Plath Fantasia' (Hughes, 1989, n.pag.). Instead, as David Lodge points out, the biographical novel, or biofiction, 'which takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography', has been increasingly popular since the end of the twentieth century, with writers proving particularly attractive subjects (Lodge, 2007, p. 8). The biopic proves similarly fond of 'resurrect[ing] authors', and just as heedless of the death-sentence meted out by literary theory (Shachar, 2019, p. 17). On some level, the popularity of authors as the subjects of biopics is surprising, given that 'literary composition' is 'profoundly *uncinematic* as a subject of cinematographic attention' (Buchanan, 2013, p. 4). Yet their popularity as novelistic subjects is no less startling, to wit the multiple novels inspired by Henry James, who would seem to embody the truism that 'writers spend too much time writing to have otherwise eventful lives' (Saunders, 2008, p. 128). Perhaps it is precisely this sense of 'privileging and tormenting *apartness*' that accounts for the compulsive return to author figures across both media (Buchanan, 2013, p. 5). There remain, however, many unanswered questions about the custody battle over the facts of a life that

biographical fiction effects. Did the subject, contra Hughes, ever own such facts to begin with? Is this a forcible takeover or a negotiated sharing? And why has the (post)postmodern, post-truth world proven so hospitable an environment for these facts to be contested?

This collection responds to the need, voiced by Michael Lackey in the introduction to his *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (2014), for ‘studies that clarify precisely what only the biographical novel can discover’ (p. 25). This in itself echoes Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars’ earlier call for scholars to ‘locate this genre in the field of literary production’ (1999, p. 18). The eleven essays collected in this work are vital waypoints in this process of discovery and location, situating biofiction, and its sister genre, the biopic, in relation to their generic, cultural, and ideological contexts. All are original commissions, some emerging from the Postmodernist Biofiction Conference held on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2017 at the University of Reading. The conference in turn grew out of the editor’s research-led undergraduate module of the same name, the first of its kind in the UK. The contributors, who include postgraduate students alongside established authorities on, and practitioners of biofiction, share an interest in nineteenth- and twentieth-century subjects, which lends cohesion to the volume. The popularity of Victorian writers as the subjects of biofiction can be understood in terms of the prevalent sense of the Victorians as the progenitors of the contemporary (O’Gorman, 2008, p. 277; Hargreaves, 2008, p. 285). This is compounded by the wealth of readily available information about their lives, a fund that diminishes the further back in history one ventures. This dual sense of relevance and accessibility is even more applicable to Modernist subjects, while the innovations of the self-declared ‘New Biographers’ make the period doubly significant to biofiction’s own reinvigoration of the life-writing genre. Notwithstanding this concentration, the collection’s emphasis is on plurality, with contributors’ unique critical approaches converging without circumscription on the shared ground of biographical film and fiction. It is hoped, then, that the collection will inspire future work on these genres from a multitude of critical directions.

The essays are organised into four main groups. The first locates the origins of biofiction in the historical novel, and in Modernist experiments in life writing. It opens with Michael Lackey’s ‘Death-Bringing History and the Origins of Biofiction’, in which the author opposes the representative subject that, for Georg Lukács, was fundamental to the historical novel, to the biographical novel’s transcendental subject, epitomised by Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1886). Lackey then considers two novelists, Henry James and Colm Tóibín, who

disdained the historical novel as fatalistic, its subject vulnerable to the puppetry of external forces. These are forces that biofiction, by converting the historical subject into a literary symbol, is better able to resist. Lackey's piece is followed by Todd Avery's chapter on 'Lytton Strachey and the Ethics of Biofiction in the Post-Truth Moment', which traces the *Eminent Victorians* author's 'catalytic influence' on the emergence of biofiction (Avery, p. 27). The three essays in the following group are case studies of biographical novels about long-nineteenth-century subjects. Kylie Mirmohamadi's 'Portraits of the Writer as a Young Woman', about Charlotte Brontë biofiction, locates the novels' uniqueness less in their generic designation than in their paratextual materials. For Mirmohamadi, the paratext serves as a rich repository for 'the dual and sometimes conflicting assertions of biofictional texts; that they are the result of creative imagination, but still hold some claim to verifiable "truth"' (p. 49). The following essay by Daniel Buckingham, "'The Shadow of Henry James': Biofiction and the Distorted Image', reads David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004) as indicative of the 'biography of the hero' for which Lukács criticised biofiction (p. 55). It articulates the consequences of the biographical novel's distortion for the marginalisation of Constance Fenimore Woolson, as well as the recuperative potential of Emma Tennant's Woolson-focalised biofiction, *Felony* (2002). Lastly, Patricia Stuart-Reid compares biographical and biofictional treatments of Rupert Brooke in terms of 'definitions, goals, and techniques', arguing that critical constructions of the genres as competitive belie their potential for rich symbiosis (p. 68).

A guest essay by novelist Maggie Gee on 'Onceness, Biofiction, and the Living Body' opens the third group, which concerns the fertile sub-genre of biographical novels about Woolf. Using her own novels, including *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2014), as case studies, Gee explores the tensions between biofiction's reinventions and the impenetrable aspects of the subject's unique life. The following essay, by Elisabetta Varalda, enters into dialogue with *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*, while also speaking to Mirmohamadi's interest in the paratext and connecting the biographical novel with appropriative fiction. In Varalda's reading, Gee's novel rewrites not only Woolf's life, but also aspects of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Varalda then reads the latter as an antecedent for contemporary biofiction in its use of personal history. Monica Latham's 'Biofiction as Corrective Justice' explores the potential of Ellen Hawkes and Peter Manso's *The Shadow of the Moth: A Novel of Espionage with Virginia Woolf* (1984) to revise the subject's image in popular culture, limited by its reliance on resonances that are inaudible to the non-academic reader. Elaine Hudson's *Adeline: A Novel*

of *Virginia Woolf* (2015) as Reflective Biography’ then reads Norah Vincent’s Woolf-focused biofiction as ambiguously situated between biography and autobiography, with Virginia’s alter-ego Adeline serving as the thread by which Vincent is woven into the text.

The fourth and final group of essays concerns the related genre of the biopic. While Robert Rosenstone’s argument that written and filmed biography ‘are less different than they may appear’ is supported by their shared, quasi-masochistic fascination with writers (2007, p. 14), others, such as Geoffrey Wall, view the biopic as written biography’s poor relation, hopelessly unable to capture the ‘deep time’ of a life (Wall, 2013, p. 126). While biofiction’s ability to show the subject thinking possesses obvious advantages over the conventional cradle-to-grave biopic, the *anti*-biopics considered by Virginia Newhall Rademacher avoid the comparison by changing the terms of the debate. As Rademacher argues, while biopics that claim to be ‘based on a true story [. . .] often oversimplify complexity and contradiction’, the *anti*-biopic embraces uncertainty, and lays bare the processes by which distorted versions of a life are crystallised into ‘truth’ (p. 142). Her choice of case study, *I, Tonya* (2017), is similarly debate-changing, concerning as it does a figure-skater rather than a writer. Its relevance to this collection is clinched, however, by Rademacher’s illumination of Tonya Harding’s frustrated efforts to ‘author’ a narrative that was repeatedly overwritten by third parties. She terms these self-conscious interventions of the self and others in shaping a life the ‘specular’, while the ‘crash-and-burn’ stories thereby evoked are deemed ‘spectacular’. Her final organisational metaphor, that of ‘speculation’, has, to my mind, a broader applicability, emphasising how the authors of biofiction also favour ‘the benefits of variance’ over the uncertain ‘long-term stability of any representation’ (p. 148). The final essay, Chloe de Lullington’s ‘Unwrapping Lady Lazarus’, traces valuable connecting strands between the biopic and popular fiction. It explores how *Sylvia* (2003) rejects Plath’s own penchant for ‘low prose’ (Rose, 2014, pp. 8-9) even while co-opting her for a “‘soap-opera’ life story” (Brain, 2011, p. 188) aimed at a popular audience. This is compared to Stephen Daldry’s subtler marbling of Woolf’s life across the three strands of his film *The Hours* (2002). Like *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*, Daldry’s text has multiple genre affiliations: at once a biopic about Woolf, an adaptation of Cunningham’s novel, and an appropriation of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

Having laid out the path before us, the remaining task of this introduction is to begin to position the biographical novel and film in relation to the three contexts indicated at the outset, those of genre, culture, and ideology. In terms of genre, several writers in this collection respond to

Lackey's call to 'clarify the nature and role of the biographical within biofiction' (2017, p. 13). As aforementioned, Avery sees the genre as a response to Modernist developments in life writing, namely Stracheyite biography. For him, Strachey anticipates contemporary biofiction's subordination of factual detail to inner thoughts, as well as its tendency to present the author's, rather than the subject's vision of life. Strachey also, in his disregard for objective accuracy, pre-empts biofiction's appeal to a post-truth age. Whereas Avery examines the influence of a particular type of biography on the biographical novel, Stuart-Reid takes the opposite line, touching on the so-called 'biofiction effect', whereby the fictional characteristics of conventional literary biography are thrown into higher relief by the advent of the newer genre (Cooke, 2005, p. 290). Latham, in turn, adopts a more granular approach, considering the relationship between individual works of biography and biofiction. She reads *The Shadow of the Moth* (1984) as Hawkes and Manso's feminist response to Quentin Bell's *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (1972), and as a recapitulation of views that Hawkes had previously expressed in her review essays. This indicates the potential of biofiction to perform the role of literary criticism, intervening in scholarly debates and expanding such conversations to include the non-academic reader. Latham also reads Hawkes and Manso's novel as a 'hypertextual rewriting of Woolf's [...] spoof biography', 'Friendship's Gallery' (1907), which connects to Varalda's understanding of biofiction and appropriation as sister practices (Latham, p. 115). This also speaks to Gee's figuring of *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* as 'in part a tribute to Woolf's *Orlando*' (p. 94).

While Latham considers biofiction's potential to recuperate Woolf's popular image, both Stuart-Reid and Buckingham explore the potential of the biographer, and the biographical novelist, to condemn. Stuart-Reid's analysis of Nigel Jones's *Rupert Brooke: Life, Death and Myth* (2015) equates Jones's avowed attempt to excavate the reality beneath the Brooke mythology with a tendency to present the subject as a thoroughly unpleasant individual. Conversely, the focalisation of Jill Dawson's biofiction *The Great Lover* (2009) through Brooke himself and through Nell, a (fictitious) maid, negates the need for Dawson's authorial colours to be nailed so overtly to the mast. In a further turn of the die, Buckingham considers the potential of biofiction, specifically Lodge's *Author, Author*, to provide a similar indictment of the subject as Stuart-Reid perceived in Jones's biography. The subject's dread of finding among Constance Woolson's remains a note to the effect that 'I am going to kill myself because Henry James doesn't love me' is thus mined for its capacity to provide ironic condemnation of James's narcissism (Lodge, 2004, p. 211). However, in the

final analysis, Buckingham concludes that such a reading is complicated by the ambivalent authorial identification that, for him, is intrinsic to biofiction. In this reckoning, the imaginative empathy with the subject that biofiction, *sui generis*, demands, is seen to prohibit straightforward condemnation, even while the suggested comparison between author and subject's works promotes an attitude that is implicitly rivalrous.

The issue of rivalry is also addressed by Varalda in her analysis of the relationship between Maggie Gee's fictionalised Woolf and her invented author-protagonist, Angela Lamb. For Angela, Woolf's seemingly immortal name promotes anxieties about the longevity of her own, of whether her bestselling works, in *To the Lighthouse's* formulation, 'would remain' (Woolf, 1927, p. 142). Varalda interprets this unease as germane to the contemporary authors who write back to their influential predecessors. If this savours of a Bloomian anxiety of influence, it is, however, balanced by her consideration of biofiction's potential to engage more actively with its subjects' works. Taking a similar approach to Mirmohamadi in her reading of novels about Brontë, Varalda reveals how biofiction, like other forms of life writing, works to privilege biographical readings of its subjects' corpuses. What Mirmohamadi writes of Sheila Kohler's *Becoming Jane Eyre* (2009) is as true of *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan*: both engage in 'a metafictional manoeuvre' whereby each author's 'fictional transposition of aspects of [the subject's] life' reveals how *Jane Eyre* (1847) or *To the Lighthouse* respectively transposed 'life into fiction' (p. 43). This reading extends Kohler and Gee's achievements, as seemingly self-contained versions of Brontë's and Woolf's lives partake of a critical function, directing their audience in how two canonical texts might productively be read.

As will be apparent from this brief survey, complete emancipation of biofiction from the biographical may be neither possible nor desirable. Yet it is equally clear that biofiction is no poor relation to conventional life writing, but has the potential to exist in a symbiotic relationship, to wit the influence of the 'new biography' on biofiction, the 'biofiction effect', and the capacity of specific biographical novels to balance the preoccupations of 'straight' biographies. As we have seen, biofiction can also perform the role of literary criticism, engaging the 'common reader' with scholarly debates and directing their subsequent encounters with the subject's work. The figure of the non-academic reader brings us to a second shaping context, and a second connecting strand for the authors grouped here: the relationship of biographical film and fiction to popular culture. Biofiction about James, Woolf, and, to a lesser extent, Brontë, shares a common tension: the potential incongruity of writing about a highbrow subject in a



popular form. As Buckingham explores, *Author, Author* is a work of popular fiction with an ambivalent relationship to the popular. Much of the novel depicts a 'battle of the brows' in which Henry loses sales to his more accessible contemporaries, namely Constance Woolson, George Du Maurier and Oscar Wilde. It thus 'presents a false sense of middlebrow dominance to non-academic readers' while at the same time reaffirming James's supremacy to readers cognisant—and Lodge closes with a reminder—of his ultimate canonisation. (Buckingham, p. 65). This resonates with Latham's reading of the complexities of address in *The Shadow of the Moth*. Like *Author, Author*, Hawkes and Manso's novel betrays a desire to redress aspects of Woolf's popular representation, but achieves this through an 'intertextual practice' of allusion to her work that only a knowing reader can access (Latham, p. 114). Other writers, such as Juliet Gael and John Brownlow, resolve the inherent problematics of representing a literary subject in a popular form to a mixed audience by flattening the literary aspect of their narratives. Thus Gael presents Brontë as 'a romantic heroine' whose married life is characterised by *not* writing (Mirmohamadi, p. 43), while Brownlow, as mentioned previously, engages an audience not necessarily 'interested in Sylvia Plath' by subordinating her poetic practice to her marital difficulties (Brownlow, 2003, p. v).

Such (mis)representations lend weight to Gee's suggestion that 'maybe a lot of biofiction is actually fan fiction', in which the author indulges in a form of 'celebrity-worship' without fully engaging the reader's critical faculties (p. 89). Borrowing from Auden, we might say that such forms of biofiction 'make [...] nothing happen' beyond co-opting the subject's life for a popular narrative (1939, p. 34). Yet *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* also imagines an alternative scenario, in which Woolf's work survives in the valley of Gee's making. This scenario is rehearsed through the narrative of Gerda, Angela's thirteen-year-old daughter, who, as Varalda discusses, picks up *To the Lighthouse* 'in order to find more reasons to hate' her mother's resurrected companion, but soon finds herself 'gripped' (Gee, 2014, p. 179; p. 215). She then moves on to *A Room of One's Own* (1929), giving a public reading of 'Shakespeare's Sister' at an international Woolf conference. The spectre of 'Virginia' thus inspires Gerda's encounter with the historical Woolf, which trajectory Varalda mines for its symbolism. In her reading, Gerda symbolises the ideal biofiction reader, whose 'access to rather difficult canonical texts' is facilitated by the biographical novelist's 'practice of rewriting' (p. 106). Yet this runs up against Buckingham's critique of Lodge's representation of 'middlebrow, popular texts (including his own) as valuable inasmuch as they constitute conduits for reverence towards the highbrow' (p. 58). To be clear, both *Virginia Woolf in*

*Manhattan* and *Author, Author* are worthy foci in their own right, but emphasising biofiction's reverberative potential reveals a further, pedagogical function, redeeming the genre from suspicions of 'elevated groupiedom' (Gee, p. 89).

The final issue to consider is the ethical certainties whose shores are eroded by the biographical novel. Such a statement might seem grandiose at first blush: as Gee points out, 'in a way [ethical choices] don't matter' because 'novels don't actually kill anyone, do they?'. Yet as Gee also acknowledges, 'in another way they matter a lot', not least because of the fact of death that removes their real-life subjects' right of reply (p. 96). Given that the popularity of biofiction has snowballed since the new millennium, it is worth considering, as Lackey invites us to, what it is about the contemporary condition that 'led so many [...] readers to accept such works' (2017, p. 13), works in which the facts of the subject's life are secondary to the creative truth of the novelist's vision. A popular response to such a question concerns the postmodernist recognition that 'biography' and 'fiction' are not hermeneutically sealed chambers. As Mirmohamadi points out, 'all types of narrative, regardless of whether they are nominally 'factual' or 'fictional' rely on tactical inclusions and omissions' (p. 50). In other words, biography, like fiction, is constructed rhetorically and relies on selection and interpretation. For practitioners such as Jay Parini, then, biofiction is justified by the recognition that 'biographies are really novels in disguise' (Parini, 1997, p. 253).

Yet even though 'fact and fiction have never been watertight categories', the permeability of the division thrown into still higher relief by postmodernism, Gee indicates the endurance of an inner 'rigorous prig' that many of us will recognise, who 'always wants to know: but is this true?' (p. 87). Clearly, the advent of biofiction does not constitute a crossing of the Rubicon to the point where 'anything goes'. The question, as ever, is one of degree: each biographical novelist must decide how much artistic licence is permissible in the construction of an engaging narrative, and at what point the departures are so many, or so great, that biofiction becomes simply fiction. This is particularly pertinent to non-academic readers, who may be insufficiently familiar with the subject to disentangle fact from invention. For Colm Tóibín, 'the fewer liberties you take with the main character the better'; there exists an inviolable contract with the reader 'that says, 'more or less, I am sticking to the facts here'' (2018, p. 160). Yet the hedging nature of such a statement also constitutes an authorial disclaimer: while pledging allegiance to 'the facts', Tóibín admits the possibility that this allegiance will waver -- not often, to be sure, but sometimes. For Rademacher, such transparency gives biofiction and the anti-biopic the

advantage over biography and the biopic respectively. 'By openly acknowledging their use of fiction', she argues, 'these works rebel against facile, potentially distorting narratives that lay claim to singular truth' (p. 153). It may be, then, that even while biofiction's potential for freedom with the known facts is in keeping with our era's emphasis on post-truth, its candidness about such liberties provides a kind of certainty in a sea of information pollution. The acknowledged fabrications of biofiction might, in other words, be preferable to the concealed ones of ostensibly 'factual' narratives. Biofiction might, at the last, and in the words of Louisa Treger, 'be a lie through which the truth can emerge' (n.d., n.p.).

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**PART ONE:**

**ORIGINS:**

**BIOFICTION, THE HISTORICAL NOVEL,  
AND THE NEW BIOGRAPHY**

# CHAPTER TWO

## DEATH-BRINGING HISTORY AND THE ORIGINS OF BIOFICTION

MICHAEL LACKEY

### Abstract

How can we explain the origins of biofiction? Scholars suggest that the emergence of history-as-science contributed significantly to the rise of the historical novel, which exposes the way historical forces shape and determine the human. Many scholars treat the biographical novel as a form of the historical novel. But by looking at some authors of biofiction who opposed the determinism and even fatalism implicit in the history-as-science approach and its concomitant aesthetic form, the historical novel, I show how biofiction came into being as an aesthetic reaction against the historical novel. Instead of picturing the historical forces that shape and determine the human, the biographical novel gives readers a model of a figure that defies or evades environmental conditioning or cultural determinism by shaping and determining the world around him or her.

In an interview about biofiction, Bethany Layne asks Colm Tóibín if there is a difference between the historical novel and the biographical novel. Tóibín says that there is, and he provides an example to illustrate. Tóibín notes that Henry James's apartment in Kensington was wired for electricity in 1896. A historical novelist, Tóibín claims, would incorporate such a detail in his or her work: 'If you're writing a historical novel this is a marvelous scene for you where you're actually getting a key moment in history and you're integrating it into lives and you're seeing what the next day will be like.' Tóibín does not write such scenes, because 'it would ruin my novel. It would be the end of the novel.' By stark contrast, he writes biographical novels, such as *The Master*, which is about James. What makes *The Master* a biographical novel is that he 'must be in James's mind all the time' (2019, p. 228). Tóibín's remarks are important

not just for understanding his now canonical biographical novel about James but also the history and origins of the biographical novel more generally. In the following pages, I discuss the intellectual context that necessitated the rise of the biographical novel, and I show how Tóibín's novel provides insight into the origins of biofiction as well as the nature of the contemporary biographical novel.

## I.

'it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate.'  
(Friedrich Nietzsche, 1997, p. 59)

Let me start with the intellectual context. The rise of the biographical novel was in part a reaction against the hegemony of history, specifically of history as a science.<sup>1</sup> After the French Revolution, there arose in Europe history programs, in which professors used rigorous methods of analysis to identify and define what caused cataclysmic historical events. The emerging view was that scientific knowledge of history would expose the structures that led to 1789. Systematizing knowledge of what happened, therefore, would enable those in the present to predict and thereby avoid future catastrophes. This attempt to systematize history and to establish more reliable methods for doing history partly contributed to the rise of the historical novel, an aesthetic form that visualizes the laws and causes of human-generated disasters.

In his landmark study *The Historical Novel* Georg Lukács clearly articulates how the nineteenth-century's scientific approach to history animated aesthetics. For Lukács, post-French Revolution historians developed rational and scientific models that enabled thinkers 'to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned' (Lukács, 1983, p. 24), and their concomitant historical works were 'a rational periodization of history, an attempt to comprehend the historical nature and origins of the present rationally and scientifically' (Lukács, 1983, p. 28). This approach led to the rise of the historical novel, which enables readers to

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Todd Avery, who has helped me understand how the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century debate about history as science impacted modernist writers and led to the rise of biofiction. For Avery's best work on this topic, see "'The Historian of the Future': Lytton Strachey and Modernist Historiography between the Two Cultures,' in *ELH* 77(4)(Winter 2010): 841-866; and 'Art and Ethics: Lytton Strachey and the Origins of Biofiction,' in *American Book Review* 39(1)(November/December 2017): 5.

're-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality' (Lukács, 1983, p. 42). Of crucial importance for this literary project is the author's ability to use the 'scientific method' in order to clarify and expose 'objective connections and laws' (Lukács, 1983, p. 304) in history, for as Lukács asserts: 'A writer who deals with history cannot chop and change with his material as he likes. Events and destinies have their natural, objective weight, their natural, objective proportion. If a writer succeeds in producing a story which correctly produces these relationships and proportions, then human and artistic truth will emerge alongside the historical' (Lukács, 1983, p. 290). Using 'correct scientific means' (Lukács, 1983, p. 305), the best historical novelists will accurately picture what led to major historical collisions and thereby give readers ways of predicting and perhaps avoiding future debacles.

Friedrich Nietzsche rejects as limited and even destructive the scientific approach that Lukács praises as an aesthetic ideal. In his 1874 essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,' Nietzsche faults any system that subordinates life: 'Is life to dominate knowledge and science, or is knowledge to dominate life? Which of these two forces is the higher and more decisive? There can be no doubt: life is the higher, the dominating force, for knowledge which annihilated life would have annihilated itself with it' (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 121). That is the main idea in the essay, but it is how that idea functions in relation to history that is most significant for Nietzsche. For the *Übermensch* philologist, the 'mighty historical movement' (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 59) of his age has, contrary to prevailing opinion, significantly injured humans and even life. Nietzsche is not saying that history *per se* has had this effect. He stipulates that history could, under the right conditions, contribute to life. He is saying that history as it has been configured in his day is the problem. For Nietzsche, when history becomes a 'pure, sovereign science' (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 67), it subjugates life to the dictates of knowledge, which leads to degeneration and ultimately death. Instead of history, science or knowledge, life should be the first principle of any system. Within this framework, history must serve life; it must enable and empower life to grow and develop.

It is when Nietzsche discusses biographies that readers can best see the degree to which he stands in direct opposition to Lukács. For the Hungarian Marxist, the protagonist of the historical novel must function as a representative symbol of the people, the nation, and the age, a figure that embodies 'social trends and historical forces' (Lukács, 1983, p. 34), which is why this character must be fictional, ordinary and average. The



development and evolution of the protagonist is not important, because the focus should be on the objective societal, political, and economic forces that shape and determine the character's being. Lukács refers to this as the 'derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity' (Lukács, 1983, p. 19) of the specific age. To illustrate, Lukács uses the work of Sir Walter Scott as an ideal: 'Scott never shows the evolution of such a personality. Instead, he always presents us with the personality complete. Complete, yet not without the most careful preparation. This preparation, however, is not a personal and psychological one, but objective, social-historical' (Lukács, 1983, p. 38). The personal and the psychological are subordinate to the 'objective, social-historical' realities that shape and determine the representative protagonist's identity. To put the matter succinctly, the protagonist must be an invention so that the author could use him or her to illustrate how the objective historical and social forces dictate the form of his or her identity.

We get additional insight into the nature of the invented protagonist of the historical novel when we attend to the way an actual historical figure as a protagonist fails, according to Lukács. Symbolic not just of an average person, the ideal protagonist (which, for Lukács, should be fictional) is supposed to represent the whole nation and age. Consequently, to give the character too much personality, individuality, or autonomy would undermine the figure's function to symbolize a larger representative reality from the past. Choosing to foreground the social-historical and to subordinate the uniquely biographical is one reason why Lukács considers Scott an exemplary novelist: 'he never creates eccentric figures, figures who fall psychologically outside the atmosphere of his age' (Lukács, 1983, p. 60). This rejection of eccentric figures explains Lukács's condemnation of the biographical novel, which has an actual historical figure as its protagonist. According to Lukács, what biographical novelists give readers is too particular: 'the facts of a great man's life tell us at best the particular occasion on which something great was achieved, but they never give us the real context, the real chain of causation as a result of which this great accomplishment played its part in history' (Lukács, 1983, p. 306). Since the aesthetic goal is to use the protagonist to accurately represent an historical place and age, basing a protagonist on an actual historical figure would doom the novel to failure. Lukács clarifies why this is the case: 'The better the writer's work, that is, the more truthfully he portrays the particular occasion on the basis of scrupulously checked and selected material from the given life, the more noticeable and striking will its occasional and objectively accidental character appear' (Lukács, 1983, p. 303-04). A work is good insofar as it accurately portrays

the reality of the actual person's life. But this is also the basis for the biographical novel's failure. The author of a historical novel invents a protagonist that symbolizes the objective social-historical reality of the time. When an author bases the novel on an actual historical figure, much in that life will fail to symbolize or represent the social-historical reality. Thus, the protagonist of a biographical novel will contain much that is irrelevant ('accidental') and it will give the reader a distorted picture of the representative historical reality, because in focusing on the individual biography, it will overlook and/or distort the larger social-historical picture, which is of ultimate importance. As should be clear, Lukács treats the biographical novel as a version or subgenre of the historical novel. He refers to it as 'the biographical form in the present-day historical novel' (Lukács, 1983, p. 300).<sup>2</sup>

Given that Nietzsche privileges life over history (knowledge or science), the goal of writers should not be to illuminate the social-historical reality that shapes and determines human subjectivity—that is what historical novelists do. Rather, authors should showcase the human ability to defy or evade environmental conditioning or cultural determinism. This focus on being independent of the culture and environment explains Nietzsche's approach to biographies: 'if you want biographies, do not desire those which bear the legend 'Herr So-and-So and his age,' but those upon whose title-page there would stand 'a fighter against his age'' (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 95). For Lukács, the protagonist of a historical novel should function as a representative symbol of 'his age,' but for Nietzsche, the biographical subject should be a figure that transcends the culture and environment.

The ideas in Nietzsche's 1874 essay mandated the formation of a corresponding aesthetic form. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1886) is that work, and it fulfills the definition of biofiction. Throughout the work, the

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<sup>2</sup> Treating the biographical novel as a version of the historical novel has been a consistent problem. Here are some recent scholars who have done this: Mark C. Carnes, *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education Limited, 2009); Jerome De Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Hamish Dalley, *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory, and the Representation of Contested Pasts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London and New York: Verso, 2015). For a scholarly clarification explaining why the biographical novel should not be treated as a version of the historical novel, see the introduction to my book *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions across the Globe* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

connection between a mental orientation and human relationships is of central concern. Those who have adopted a debilitating and destructive mentality Zarathustra refers to as ‘despisers of life’ (2006, p. 6). By stark contrast, Zarathustra represents ‘the voice of the healthy body’ (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 22), which is a body that is perpetually open ‘to create beyond itself’ (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 24). Consistent with Nietzsche’s earlier works, Zarathustra holds that ‘life wants to climb and to overcome itself by climbing’ (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 78).

If Nietzsche were working within a Lukács literary tradition, then his Zarathustra would represent (or at least try to represent) the biographical subject and therewith the past with as much precision and accuracy as possible in order to clarify how we have come to be as we currently are. But Nietzsche is working within a biofiction tradition. Thus, his work emphasizes individual autonomy over historical determinism, which explains why he is so willing to alter facts about his protagonist. Nietzsche’s biofiction is supposedly about the Persian prophet Zarathustra (also referred to as Zoroaster), but in *Ecce Homo*, he indicates that the work is actually an unapologetic representation of himself and his own worldview. Instead of accurately picturing Zarathustra and his age, Nietzsche freely admits that the Zarathustra in his book is the opposite of the actual person, and as such, his Zarathustra is actually Nietzsche. Nietzsche is unambiguous on this score. The actual Zarathustra invented morality, but Nietzsche’s Zarathustra overcomes and overturns the simplistic good-and-evil model: ‘the self-overcoming of the moralist, into his opposite—into me—that is what the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth’ (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 326). Nietzsche fictionalizes the historical person in order to give his readers himself and his own vision of life.

And the vision in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is about autonomy. For Nietzsche, the goal of life is endless creation, so instead of turning to the past in order to define who and what we are today, an approach that presupposes the death of human autonomy, we need to invent new ways of seeing and being in the present and for the future, which is Nietzsche’s definition of life. This explains why Zarathustra only wants disciples who are willing to reject him: ‘It dawned on me: let Zarathustra speak not to the people, but instead to companions! Zarathustra should not become the shepherd and dog of a herd!’ (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 14). In short, the Zarathustra model shifts the locus of autonomy and power away from himself and to others. After sharing his view of life with others, he says:

You say you believe in Zarathustra? But what matters Zarathustra! You are my believers, but what matter all believers!

You had not yet sought yourselves, then you found me. All believers do this; that's why all faith amounts to so little.

Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when you have all denied me will I return to you. (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 59)

To be a companion of Zarathustra, the person must reject Zarathustra and formulate a vision of his or her own, because the goal should be to activate life through the creation of a unique and new way of living. What Nietzsche does, then, is to use the Persian prophet in order to make the case for and model human agency.

In short, the governing idea in Nietzsche's essay and subsequent biofiction is clear: 'Let us at least learn better how to employ history for the purpose of *life*' (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 66). What he means by life (and, by implication, death) is of crucial importance. Those beings that are totally conditioned by history and the environment are basically dead, because life is to be found in autonomous action, when humans behave as quasi-independent agents.<sup>3</sup> Given this logic, the historical novel would be a death-bringing aesthetic form, as suggested by my title, because it accentuates the degree to which humans are at the mercy of history, culture, and the environment. Henry James came to the same conclusion about history as Nietzsche, and it is for this reason that he condemns the historical novel, as I demonstrate in the next section. In *The Master*, Tóibín uses the life and work of James in order to clarify why the biographical novel had to supplant the historical novel.

## II.

Balzac 'created life, he did not copy it.'  
(Oscar Wilde, 1997, p. 927)

For those in a Nietzschean tradition, rejecting the historical novel and its founding principles is necessary in order to preserve the dignity of the human, which derives from the capacity for autonomy and agency. Late James (1899-1916) works within this Nietzschean tradition, and this is clear from a 1901 letter he wrote to Sarah Orne Jewett in which he expresses one of the most salient objections to the historical novel. Jewett had sent James a copy of her historical novel *The Tory Lover*. James responded, but instead of using the occasion to discuss the quality of

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Nietzsche's understanding of an attenuated version of human agency, see my essay: 'Killing God, Liberating the 'Subject': Nietzsche and Post-God Freedom,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60(4) (October 1999): 737-754.

Jewett's novel, he reflects on the irredeemable vices of the historical novel. For James, this is an aesthetic form that is characterized by 'a fatal cheapness.' The historical novelist gives readers a multitude of 'little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints,' but what it lacks is 'the real thing,' which consists of 'the invention, the representation of the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ours, that make the modern world.' All of these are 'non-existent' in the historical novel, an aesthetic form that James calls 'humbug.' Of crucial importance for James is the mysterious, indefinable, semi-autonomous dimension of human consciousness, which is not just different from but diametrically opposed to the 'conditioned' consciousness represented in the historical novel (James, 1955, pp. 202-03).

Tóibín's *The Master* is an exemplary biofiction not just in what it does but also in the way it reflects on itself as a biofiction. In the novel Tóibín incorporates James's letter to Jewett into one of the key scenes. Late in *The Master*, Henry's brother William expresses concern about Henry's work. He encourages Henry to abandon the novel of manners about the superficial and materialistic English and to turn his attention to a 'novel which would deal with our American history,' specifically 'about the Puritan Fathers' (Tóibín, 2004, p. 317). Henry not only rejects William's proposal, but also uses the occasion to express his contempt for the historical novel: "May I put an end to this conversation," Henry said, "by stating clearly to you that I view the historical novel as tainted by a fatal cheapness" (Tóibín, 2004, p. 317). To punctuate his point, Henry ends the discussion by dismissing William's proposal with a single word, 'humbug' (Tóibín, 2004, p. 317). The significance of these remarks, many of which are lifted from the Jewett letter, is staggering. In one of the most celebrated biographical novels, the protagonist denounces the historical novel, which clearly suggests that *The Master* should not be considered a version or subgenre of the historical novel.

That this is the case, however, is not as important as why, and Tóibín provides a clear answer by setting Henry off from William. As Henry says: 'While my brother makes sense of the world, I can only briefly attempt to make it come alive, or become stranger' (Tóibín, 2004, p. 334). Like traditional historical novelists, William seeks to make logical and rational sense of the world, which is one reason why he would like his brother to author a historical novel. The implication is that a novel about the Puritans would make sense of who Americans currently are and how they came to be. But Tóibín's Henry, who admires Nathaniel Hawthorne, has a much different view. Notice how Tóibín describes the young James's

response to Hawthorne's work in a way that will foreshadow the later James's rejection of the historical novel: 'Hawthorne had not observed life, Henry thought, as much as imagined it, found a set of symbols and images which would set life in motion' (Tóibín, 2004, p. 163). The aesthetic objective is not to passively observe and then represent what happened; that is what the death-bringing historical novelist does. The goal is to activate life, to create a way of seeing and being that would promote and advance new and rich life forms in the authorial present and for the future.

With these two separate approaches to the novel in mind, the reference to a 'fatal cheapness' in both James's letter to Jewett and Tóibín's novel assumes considerable significance and meaning. For both James and Tóibín, there is a fatalistic dimension to the historical novel, because it underscores how humans are at the mercy of ('conditioned' by) external forces—the wiring of James's house will have discernible and necessary consequences on the inner life of characters. And the historical novel is a 'cheap' literary form because it lacks the richness of creativity—the historical novel unimaginatively pictures what happened rather than inventing a new way of seeing or being in the present and for the future. This clarifies why Tóibín claims that writing an historical novel would mean 'the end of the novel.' The purpose of the novel is not to picture humans at the mercy of history, which is a form of death. It is to activate life, and that is achieved by exposing life as unsystematizable and strange, modelling the process of autonomous action, and inventing a new way of living and being. Tóibín suggests that James's rejection of the historical novel and realization that the purpose of literature was to set life into motion paved the way for his most extraordinary novels, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). But Tóibín also uses James to provide a context for understanding why there was growing discomfort with and even a rejection of the historical novel and the emergence of an alternative literary form like the biographical novel.

### III.

'Readers don't come to biographical fiction for truth.  
They come to biographical fiction for possibilities.'  
(Chika Unigwe)

Tóibín is not the only biographical novelist to critique and reject the historical novel. In a recent interview about his biographical novels, the award-winning, Spanish writer Javier Cercas told Virginia Rademacher: