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LITERATURE REVIEW ON LIFE-WRITING GENRE BLENDING

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Abstract: When coming into contact, auto/biography and fiction are uniquely connected in all their aspects as separate genres which leads to a specific genre blending. This process which results in a new blended genre, continuously poses questions regarding the degree and the varieties of such blending. Therefore, different theories have tried to explain the genres' roles and their shaping by outlining the core characteristics of the life writing genres and those of fictional writing. The present paper gives a critical overview of the most prominent theoretical discussions in this respect, by pointing out the key questions in the area and their future study.

Keywords: *life writing, fiction, review, genre blending, biofiction, literary biography*

Introduction

Life-writing genres such as autobiography and biography, and their relation with fiction have presented literary theorists with an ample material for discussion and argument. What seems to be a clear-cut case at first glance turns out to be a source for a seemingly never-ending exploration and analysis. This stems mainly from the unique contact between the different genres, thus resulting in the creation of blended genres bearing on all aspects involved in their creation. As a result, numerous theories have been employed in uncovering the role and the possibilities and the limits of the genres' characteristics in the creation of blended genres such as biofiction or literary biography. By means of qualitative methodology, this short paper aims to chronologically, descriptively and comparatively outline the major attempts at theorizing the process of genre blending in life-writing. The major points made in various texts on the subject are being discussed in the following text. Some of the authors in this field also analyse the existing scholarship before giving their own conclusions. This paper evaluates the

Auto/Biography and Literature

Literary biography

One of the first attempts to theorize literary biography was made by Michael Benton. Following the publication of his earlier book, *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (2009), in his 2015 book *Towards a Poetics of Literary Biography*, Benton proposes a series of frameworks for the genre's analysis. His underlining question is whether a theory of biography is even possible in a genre that necessarily is submerged in a historical narrative. At the same time, to complete such theory, it is necessary to use a wide range of concepts and approaches from other fields – from social studies, psychology, literary criticism, the law, moral philosophy (Benton 2015:x). Benton creates something that Moulin calls “comparative biography”:

[It is] an amply documented analytical survey of remarkable twentieth-century British biographies, with some excursions into the nineteenth century, especially to illustrate the notion of ‘comparative biography’, defined by Richard Holmes as examining the handling of one subject by a number of different biographers, and over different historical periods. (Moulin, 2016)

In light of his comparative approach of different biographies dealing with the same person, Benton grounds his theory in the practice of the genre's creation. This is his starting point for examining the process of writing a literary biography. Next, he considers the contexts and meanings of the literary biographical texts and their effects in practice. This shows that, despite genre conventions, different biographers approach biographies differently at different times. As a result, it is practice, rather than theory that signals the complexity and the diversity of the genre. It is here that the poetics reveals the generic principles of the biographical form examining the effects achieved in the end.

Benton (2015) structures his study by considering the nature of the genre, that is, how a substantial body of data is dealt with in the biographical narrative. He then exemplifies this issue by looking into the historical and fictional aspects of biographical writing. He introduces matters concerning the biographer's presentation of literary figures and the issue of treating the biographee's own work in presenting their life.

Further in his study, Benton (2015) concludes that historical scholarship combined with literary flair is what lies at the heart of the poetics of literary biography, stressing some of the genre's particular principles in the formation of that poetics. These include ethical concerns, a sense of sympathy and an exercise of imagination.

A different approach is used by Michael Lackey whose study of the literary biography and its hybridized nature is integrated in the study of biofiction as a life-

writing genre. Following the publication of his *Truthful Fiction: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (2014) and *The American Biographical Novel* (2016a), Michael Lackey's most recent book, *Biographical Fiction. A Reader* (2016b) traces the origin and development of the twentieth and twenty-first-century biographical novel featuring reflections of eminent authors and lecturers as well as interviews and essays from major critics.

The questions Lackey (2016b) poses regarding biofiction revolve around theories of knowledge and fiction that play a part in the creation of biofictions. Lackey's collection creates a bold contention when it comes to establishing the major ideas in life-writing genre blending. Looking at all the great biofictional novels that have been published over the last thirty years Lackey suggests that this is the "golden age of biofiction." In his anthology, he has collected a wide variety of biofictional studies illustrating both primary and secondary sources.

The shift in the nature of literary truth and the meanings thus produced are also one of the main preoccupations of his previous book, *The American Biographical Novel* (2016a). According to Lackey (2016a), the "postmodern proliferation of truth systems" that has substituted the "one ultimate, absolute or dominant Truth that subsumes all other truths" is what leads to different symbolic representations in telling the life story of a person. Through the characters presented in the biographical novel, the authors manage to construct an image of their subject that stands for some idea in their time and place reflecting on the contemporary world at the same time. Some authors use the character structure rather than documentary evidence to construct the narrative. In this respect, he states, the readers should have in mind the author's interests in creating a literary symbol rather than the historical figure. As he claims in an interview with Rhys Tranter:

Biographical novelists, who have actual historical figures as their protagonists hold that humans are so clearly and easily determined by external forces. To the contrary, they tend to foreground the degree to and the sense in which a resisting and active consciousness shapes and determines the social and political world. (Tranter, 2016)

This claim is especially true for postmodern biofictional writing. The reliability of each documentary evidence is self-reflexively questioned. The result of such questioning is a possibility for a variety of interpretations each of which is equally plausible.

One concern regarding the theory and practice of biofiction is what the fictional techniques biographical novelists deploy and what they can achieve. According to Lackey (2016b), many contemporary writers choose to ground their work in history because of skepticism towards traditional literary symbols. While traditional fictional symbols can conveniently be constructed by the authors to serve their purpose and

make valid contribution to history, biographical novelists want to avoid the creation of arbitrary characters and resort to actual historical figures instead. Being novelists and not biographers they blend fact and fiction in inventing fictional scenes and characters. This understanding attests to some of the effects of postmodern fact and fiction binding. By using actual historical figures for their fictional plot lines, biofiction authors achieve a new level of expressing viewpoints and criticism.

This idea of fictionalization of biography has been in the focus of critical attention for quite some time. Georg Lukacs' 1937 "The Historical Novel" (In Lackey 2016b:249-268) and Paul Murray Kendall's 1965 "The Art of Biography" (In Lackey 2016b:275-283) show how biography and history are appropriated or "owned" in order to be "disowned" by fiction. Both authors denounce these appropriations, Georg Lukacs defines the classical historical novel as a literary form that accurately presents political and economic forces and gives the readers a precise picture of the essential factors influencing major social developments. Kendall, defines the narrative form "in relation to life-writing". For him, "the novel-as-biography" is ultimately doomed to failure because it is almost wholly imaginary. In his understanding, the real-life picture of the past is replaced by a "wayward vision of wannabe novelists, thus disqualifying it as a legitimate biography" (Lackey 2016b:1).

Life-writing was the dominating intellectual influence throughout the whole period of the 20th century as the collected essays in Lackey's *Reader* testifies. In most of the cases scholars have foregrounded the biographical into the study of biofiction. Carl Bode's 1955 groundbreaking essay "The Buxom Biographies" (In Lackey 2016b:269-274) disqualifies any writing as a biography if it is bad or stylized. Bode claims that biography stands for "unadorned truth" while an embellished truth makes the novel. Ina Schabert's "In Quest of the Other Person: Fiction as Biography" (In Lackey 2016b:284-298), examines the ability of fictional biographies and biographical fictions to give readers knowledge of the real person. On the other hand, Alain Buisine's essay "Biofictions" from 1991 (In Lackey 2016b:161-166), examines the genre of the biofiction as a new type of biography where an accurate presentation of the biographical subject is no longer possible because it has taken the form of fiction. More recently, Monica Latham's definition of biofiction from 2012 is that of a "hybrid narrative form that straddles two separate worlds, but ultimately suggests that the genre seeks to picture the biographical subject's 'life story', thus subordinating the fictional to the biographical" (Lackey 2016a:18). In contrast to these scholarly propositions, some of the authors of biofictions included in Lackey's *Reader* claim that they do not write biography or history but works of fiction. Such authors include Bruce Duffy, Joyce Carol Oates, Anne Enright, Jay Parini, Margaret Atwood, Madison Smart Bell, Joanna Scott, Ilya Troyanov, Anita Diamant, Jerome Charyn, Hilary Mantel, David Lodge, Laurent Binet, Colm Toibin, David Ebershoff.

Biofiction is distinct in how the genre play reworks the traits of either biography or fiction. The formal distinction is visible in the naming of the new form. Thomas

Mallon (In Lackey 2016b:60-63) states that word order and the subordination of the adjective and the noun when referring to something reveals the nature of the genre. When talking about writing historical fiction, an author writes fiction and not historiography or biography. He further claims that because of this word relation, it would be wrong to refer to biographical novels as fictionalized biographies and vice versa. Consequently, the word order can be considered as a valuable tool in determining the subgenres' distinct characteristics and make a difference between a biography, fictional biography and biographical fiction (In Lackey 2016b: :60-63).

Another example of the distinctions between these terms is Russell Banks' claim that he is really writing about a historical figure but strategically setting off his work from biography by writing a narrative employing dramatic shape and intent. Julia Alvarez also gives her reasons for genre distinction and discusses the wish of so many authors to call their work fiction rather than biography. According to her, the end result of portraying one's life lies in the author's talent, inclinations and abilities. Some are more inclined to become straight biographers, while others turn to different methods, approaches and objectives and thus write fiction (In Lackey 2016b:203-216).

In examining the bio in biofiction and looking into the demands of the genre biography (representation) and fiction (creation) of the life story, the "fiction" is what modifies the "bio" in biofiction. Cora Kaplan's understanding that the 'bio' in biofiction also refers to a more essentialized element of identity implies that there is something insoluble separating the two genres and preventing them from being invisibly stitched; in her understanding, the connection will always show (Kaplan 2007:65). Parini contrasts this idea by subordinating the biographical to the fictional. He claims that novels about lives and fiction have been made up with half believable discourse. In Parini's case all accent is put on the author's vision (In Lackey 2016a:22).

The cluster of illustrating the biographical and the fictional in the genre may be best summarized by Lackey's claim that the biographical novelists differ from biographers because, while authors of traditional and factual biographies seek to represent the life (or a dimension of a life) of an actual historical figure as clearly and accurately as possible, biographical novelists forego the desire to get the "biographical subject's life "right" and rather use the biographical subject in order to protect their own vision of life and the world" (Lackey 2016a:22).

Overall, in most of his publications, in trying to define the distinctive characteristics of biographical fiction, Lackey defines what he calls "literary symbolism". While past authors altered the names of their protagonists based on real persons and gave them fictional names creating literary symbols, authors of biographical fiction do this by using the real name of the real-life protagonist making the literary symbol more emphatic. One of the reasons for the rise of the need for a "historically specific and empirically based literary symbol" is the postmodern claim that all systems of knowledge are limited, flawed and untrustworthy. When it

comes to the protagonists of the biographical novels who are then turned into literary symbols, Lackey claims that the “historical-social type” of characters Lukacs talks about are different from the protagonists of the biographical novel because instead of being invented to function as symbols, the biofictional protagonists are idealized by their authors and do not represent the struggles and tensions of the historical social type (Lackey 2016a:89).

Conclusion

Our understanding, therefore, is very much in line with Lackey’s answer to Lukacs’ claim that the biographical novel cannot answer major questions because of its exaggerated and often embarrassing characters. He says that the biographical novel can “invert the historical novel” and offer a “new way of thinking about some historical moments,” giving examples from Olsen’s *Nietzsche’s Kisses*. Thus, Lackey touches upon the hybridized form of biofiction convincingly illustrating the differences between biographical fiction and life-writing and the relation between fact and fiction. He claims that the authors of biofiction and life-writing make a different contract than biographers and historians of not altering the truth and representing their subject’s life as accurately as possible. The biographer may have a biased ideological approach but that differs from a “purposeful and strategic alteration of fact” (Lackey 2016b: 9). What they do, in fact, is to make a connection between the time of their subject’s life and their own time in order to strategically convey bi-temporal truths. What is more, as Lackey believes, that turns them into literary symbols.

This transformation is a clear illustration of how fact and fiction combine in biofictional writing. Furthermore, the purpose of the author in turning a person or event into a literary symbol is made possible by the metafictional nature of the genre. The metafictionality further confirms that biofictions do open the possibility of multiple truths and plurality of meanings.

As noted above, before beginning his work, the literary biographer sets a clear goal, that of concocting a writer’s biographical story. He becomes the genre’s “puppet master”. He recognizes the commonalities between the genres and how the genre play can masterfully counterfeit important story elements. Yet, he seems to approach his task earnestly and anxiously.

In this respect, the task of the biographer is very complex. His success depends on the creative design of the stories.

Unlike their counterparts in political and military fields, they sail in uniquely dangerous waters. To one side they face the hard rocks of historical data which they ignore at their peril; to the other, a whirlpool of imaginative literature which, for biographical purposes, is of uncertain depth and relevance. (Benton 2009: 265)

The literary biographer has multiple focal strands to deal with: the biographee's life material, their existing image in the world and the bibliography of previously published biographies. All of these starting points lead to ways that may intersect with or drift apart from the construction of the biofiction. The metafictional self-reflexivity is inevitable in this process.

Literary biography as a postmodern literary structure combines document facts with strong narrative impulse. It is a narrative product that inclines and declines from its historical necessities and its narrative characteristics leaving open the question of biographical 'truth'. Narrative, in other words is a discourse that may be generated in history or fiction – even in the blending of the two genres – in which the crucial element is the time. Literary biographies comprise life histories that are, by definition, incomplete and open to discussion. This puts the authors of the literary biography in an ambivalent position. They are charged with the responsibility to present and account for the spectrum of the life from cradle to grave, yet equally expected to give point, significance and interest to that life through narrative modes of representation which are often more readily associated with fiction and which, in the biographer's interpolations and gap-filling, are constantly edging in that direction. In the writing process, the literary biographer is continuously moving between a conception of events that have occurred 'prior to entextualisation' and their representation as created by and with the text. (Benton 2009:18)

As the above supposition suggests, the life-writing genre play opens up a broad field of theoretical discussion and analysis. In order to critically approach such texts, it is important to examine the existing scholarship and theoretical reviews on the ongoing creative process of mixing genres. As a result a much clearer perspective is provided that enables better understanding on the newly developed genres on rise.

Nevertheless, this literature review also suggests the need for a particular theory dealing on the textual and structural construction of the mixed genres which is yet to be developed. Once such theory is present a wider analytical account can be provided on such texts.

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