The role of the fictional biographer in "The Aspern Papers" by Henry James, *Summertime* by J.M. Coetzee, *Absolution* by Patrick Flanery, *The Biographer's Tale* and *Possession* by A.S. Byatt

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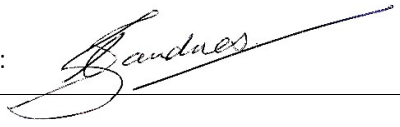
Signature:  Date: 19 December 2023

Abstract

This thesis is a literary, critical investigation of the role of the fictional biographer in selected writings by Henry James, J.M. Coetzee, Patrick Flanery, and A.S. Byatt. The central focus of the work is the establishment of the possible reason for the inclusion of fictional – rather than real or nonfictional – biographers in "The Aspern Papers" by Henry James, *Summertime* by J.M. Coetzee, *Absolution* by Patrick Flanery, and *The Biographer's Tale* and *Possession* by A.S. Byatt. My argument focuses on the essence of the quest for truth, albeit literary truth, and how this determines our appreciation of a work of fiction. This quest becomes evident in the interesting collocation of the five primary texts across historiological, sociological, cultural and philosophical divides.

I introduce my work tentatively by defining the concept of the orthodox or real biographer, and ultimately how truth itself is manifested in the biographer's quest to establish that her subject's life story is a genuine reflection of her reality. In opposition to the former, I go on to proffer a definition of the fictional biographer.

In the first chapter, I explore the philosophy of life-writing with reference to the theories of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Virginia Woolf and Philippe Lejeune. I also note how modernism and post-modernism are reflected in the five primary texts. In the second chapter, I make specific observations regarding Henry James' use of the anonymous fictional biographer in his novella, "The Aspern Papers", and further examine his deliberate metafictional interests in four short stories from his collection, *Stories of Artists and Writers*. In the third chapter on *Summertime,* I add to the autobiography-biography dichotomy, and in the fourth chapter I explore Byatt's playful and erudite metafictional toying with fact and fiction through multiple fictional biographers exploring fictional and real subjects. The fifth chapter focuses on fictional biographers writing outside of their nationality, and explores their aim to determine' socio-political truths through an engagement with confessional writing in the South African context. Finally, in chapter six I offer a comparative perspective of the uses of the fictional biographers in all five texts.

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Introduction

The concept of a fictional biographer – as opposed to a non-fictional, orthodox or real biographer – is a fascinating one for many reasons and consequently lends itself to scholarly investigation. The use of a fictional-biographer – who is a fictional character in a novel writing the life of either a fictional or real-life person – is employed by the author to query the essence of life-writing, including the kinds of assumptions readers make about the form, how it is received in the public sphere, the kinds of information the author wishes to reveal (and whether this information could ever be considered true), and the author's understanding of the powers and limitations of the mode. Life-writing as a genre has become extremely popular in the past few decades, though the concerns in this thesis are not about life-writing specifically, but how authors, in fiction, interrogate the figure of the biographer in this artistic representation as a means of investigating all matters associated with this muti-faceted figure, who is at once elusive, charming, insecure, arrogant, truthful, untrustworthy, playful, scheming, bland, traumatised, as shown in this study by all the primary texts concerned: Henry James' "The Aspern Papers" (this study's only novella, first published in 1888, where the other texts are more clearly novels); *Summertime* (2009) by J.M. Coetzee; *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) and *Possession* (1990) by A.S. Byatt; and *Absolution* (2012) by Patrick Flanery.

Considering the biographer on her own would betray the fullness of this figure, whose connections to other players within the textual experience must be studied altogether. The biographer is always connected to all other literary personas, especially within the context of works of fiction (novels in this case) that portray the biographer as a character in their texts; the biographer is connected to the biographical subject as well as the reader. The novels in this study will show that it is not always the case the these three figures are aware of each other's presence, but it is always the case that the reader is able to forge the connections between these literary figures and the roles

they play in this playful exchange. It is always within the reader that the relationship between these figures is made apparent.

The information supplied in biographical writing is assumed to be true. We read biography as a faithful representation of what happened to a single individual. But since the works in this study are fictional (a form of writing that is, by definition, a lie), the authors of the novels in this study use the qualities of fiction to study truth in all its forms: the truth of the biographical figure; the truth of the context in which that figure resides; the truth that may be found in fiction. Truth is a primary concern of all the texts under investigation. “Literary truth”, which comes under the spotlight in texts that interrogate how truth manifests in biography investigate this truth by way of also seeking to demonstrate what the biographer’s intentions are, and how the biography serves to inform or sway our understanding of this “truth”. In other words, is the biographer (where the biographer must always be considered at the very least as a storyteller) primarily concerned with fact or fiction, or can the two coexist for a specific purpose?

The fictional biographer becomes a vehicle for querying the limits of factual representation within the realm of fiction, but also a way of showing how we may expand on our understanding of the possibilities of representing fact when it is bracketed by a lie. The biographers in these texts, since they are treated as characters within a story, are animated and shown to be active participants in the biographical process. They are not inert figures, mere conduits for the truth that is already there, in circumstances where this truth lies dormant and undisturbed, waiting for the biographer to finally unearth it in its pristine form. The biographers in these texts are active, and must invigorate the truth they find. When studying the shapes and colours of a life, and transcribing these elements of a life into text, the biographer is shown to be “making” truth. It is (life) truth as process, a process that the reader must appreciate as such if she is to find any value in the text. Is the fictional biographer’s motive, then,

to tell the truth about the life of a person who lived (or at least the truth of a part of that person's life), where the fictional biographer becomes purposefully absorbed into the inextricability of the biography-autobiography dichotomy? Does this character serve as a conduit for the "absent" author who uses the same as an instrument of detachment, while still making her authorial engagement appear present for the sake of metafictional concerns? Such metafictional inquiries allow us to study a host of related concerns as they are related to truth. The truth of a life is not one thing, but impacts of several aspects of that life: matters regarding gender and sexual orientation; the interplay of modern and postmodern considerations; the role of the reader in the biography; the extent of authorial intervention, reader expectations of the biography and how this marks the reader's understanding of a life lived. There are, of course, several more such concerns that will be explored here.

Paula R. Backscheider, in *Reflections on Biography*, maintains that "the narrative of the life of a person told with honesty and interpreted with integrity and imagination will always speak to the human soul" (227). The assumption of a text being told truthfully is one whose effect is life-affirming for both biographical subject and reader. It is satisfying (cognitively, emotionally, existentially) to believe that knowledge of someone's life, rendered in text, is as it was. In coming to believe that what was offered was true, the reader then believes that she has come to know the world better, empowering the reader to use this knowledge to make certain claims about the world and act accordingly. The difficulty is transcribing that life truth in text. According to Stephen B. Oates in *Biography as High Adventure*,

> Biographies… attempt to stimulate a human life through the magic of language, through character development and the depiction of interpersonal relationships, through graphic scenes, the telling quotation, the revealing detail, and the dramatic narrative sweep… [to]

> illuminate the universal truths about humankind through the sufferings and triumphs of a single human being. (xi)

Backscheider and Oates speak to the ideal to which 'honest' authors write; they speak, too, to what ideal readers expect from orthodox biography. The texts concerned here are intent on subverting and speaking back to this ideal of fidelity, not always debunking these assumptions, but demonstrating the complexity that comes in making claims such as that one knows about the life of another. The authors do so by foregrounding that to get to the point that one knows (about a life) is a crafted process with several steps, each a possible point of failure (in representing truth), each a point with its own sets of assumptions and expectations. The first point in this process lies with the biographer herself, who we assume, in the contexts of orthodox biographies, possesses deft skill in the art of biography, where this skill coupled with an uncorrupted desire to tell the truth to begin with. We believe that the biographer wants to tell the truth.

The five novels under investigation use fictional biographers to explore different kinds of literary truths, which entail certain theoretical aspects of the views of the writers. Using their fictional biographers as conduits, but, also, to be sure, representing them as full characters within these texts, the authors express their own views on the works of the process of biography. These authors, James, Coetzee, Byatt, and Flanery, in novelistic form, contribute to a conversation that has gone on for centuries, with its most recent philosophical contributors (in the last one hundred years or so) offering a theoretical basis for this study. The works of authors, thinkers, and critics such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Virginia Woolf and Philippe Lejeune will be relied upon heavily throughout this project.

1. What is a fictional biographer?

Backscheider points out that “biography is art” (xix) and that the voice of the biographer “is the invisible bridge between the biographer and the reader and the reader and the subject” (xx). She goes on to define the biographer as

> Explorer, enquirer, hypothesizer, compiler, researcher, researcher extraordinaire, selector, and writer…. Or else manipulator, propagandist, exploiter, critic and competitor for the subject being the site of truth and genuine understanding. (xxi)

Therefore, the biographer or author “is most powerful … in choosing a voice, a point of view, [and] biographers decide their relationship to the reader, to the subject and genre; above all they decide how much of themselves to make audible” (xx). These definitions clearly pertain to the role of the “true” biographer as opposed to the fictional biographer. The role of the *fictional* biographer in writing raises numerous interesting questions. The reasons for the inclusion of such a character may vary, from creating authorial distance to exploring further the art of biography writing, which has seen a transformation from the factual, renditions of the biographical subject of the Victorian era to the modern and postmodern inclusion of fictional threads in biographical work. More dynamic than thinking of biography as a process, we should also think of it as an evolving process, a process of a process, with different cultural inflections and fashions determined over time. Merve Emre, in “The Illusion of the First Person”, (citing Walter Benjamin) tells us that biography, in its modern iteration, was invented and popularised in Europe towards the middle of the nineteenth century, especially as a consequence of the “private individual”, who was

> conceived sometime between 1830 and 1848, during the reign of Louis Philippe, often known as the first “bourgeois monarch.” Under his rule,

> the European ruling class and the middle class came together to realize their defining goal: the separation of the public domain from the private, where, as Karl Marx observes, the bourgeoisie could rejoice in “Property, the Family, Religion, and Order.” (43)

Recognising the long history of the modern biographer, the authors of the texts use the fictional biographers in their novels to disrupt or unsettle the neat assumptions we have of the role of the orthodox biographer. The author inserts a (fictional) biographer into her novel so as to interrogate the nature of biographical writing, its purpose, its promises, its industry and reception. It is an interrogation achieved primarily through lying to the reader. This unique fictional strategy, ironically, may become a vehicle for exploring the nature of “truth” with all its ethical, philosophical, and psychological implications within the realm of literature.

In this thesis I explore how the figure of the fictional biographer may become an exploratory catalyst – or be the actual exploratory character in the work – to query the complexities of life-writing and how it may affect the textual dynamic between the various literary players alluded to before: writer, reader, character, and so forth. Consequently, I investigate how such a figure establishes “an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 194). It is Coetzee’s word, “motive”, that is essential here. It shows us that the biographer is just as real, just as human (with all the complications that brings) as the biographical subject. It is from this realisation that the authors in this study seem to choose to write about the biographer as a subject of inquiry. The biographer, the authors show, does not stand above the biographical subject, but alongside her.

In studying this figure, I will also make mention of the figure of the autobiographer in cases where this is applicable. It seems unnecessary to labour the distinction between biographer and autobiographer. Simply put, the biographer writes about the life of

another, adapts this life in the shape of a written text, but the autobiographer writes about her own life. The simplicity of this definition is thoroughly problematised in the texts herein, as characters are often found to slip from one identity to another, or where the author of the text becomes implicated in the fiction we are reading, suggesting that now this character, or now this scenario, is a reflection of the author's own circumstance. Even the biographer's identity is unstable. In addition to our concern for the complexities that arise from the "overlap between biography and autobiography" (Birch and Hooper 130), this project is also interested in the intricacies of gender that arise from this dynamic – where the use of either a male or a female fictional biographer, as well as his or her sexual orientation, may be significant. These complexities are but a few that present themselves in the primary texts.

Through a critical analysis of the primary texts and theoretical inquiry into their genres – framed by existing scholarship on the same – I will expand upon claims that will reiterate the importance of the fictional biographer as a driving force behind the incorporation of reality and fiction in the modern or postmodern biography which has become popular in the twenty-first century. Sensitivity towards the literary movement into which these texts fit is entirely necessary, given that these texts are responding not only to the role of the biographer and what this means culturally, but also to how this figure fits into a very long line of literary expression. The authors perform this enquiry within their own respective literary traditions thus demonstrating the continuities and discontinuities between their own modes of expression and the modes of expression they wish to critique in their texts. Given the hyper-aware reflection on form that this suggests, it is obvious that the texts in this project fall comfortably within modernism and postmodernism, as we shall observe in their brief synopses.

2. “The Aspern Papers” by Henry James (1888)

In Henry James’ novella, “The Aspern Papers” (1888), a fictitious American biographer and editor specialises in the work of fictitious poet, Jeffrey Aspern. The nameless biographer decides to approach Aspern’s erstwhile lover, Juliana Bordereau, who is in possession of valuable “papers”. He poses as a lodger to retrieve the papers from her. His *modus operandi* is deceitful from the outset and his idolisation of the papers is questionable. He is even prepared to marry his landlady’s spinster niece, Miss Tina, to gain access to the papers. This attempt proves unsuccessful because Miss Tina burns the papers “one by one” (144). The biographer’s attempt to recreate a life, if that is his intention, based on indisputable fact, is unsuccessful – he cannot commit life to the page and so truth eludes him. However, even in the absence of factual detail, the very act of attempting to create a biography, through lies and subterfuge, becomes a work of art in itself.

Interestingly, the role of the fictional biographer in “The Aspern Papers” seems to involve the central concern of “truth” as it interrogates this truth when related to what Tessa Hadley refers to as “the ignominies – the appropriations, the disingenuousnesses, the manipulations, even the coarsenesses – implicit in the very act of writing” (320). Here, we may refer to the hypocrisy of the self-deprecating attitude of the unnamed biographer in “The Aspern Papers” who, clutching a miniature, a small portrait, of Jeffrey Aspern, opines:

> I but privately consulted Jeffrey Aspern’s delightful eyes with my own – they were so young and brilliant and yet so wise and deep: I asked him what on earth was the matter with Miss Tina. He seemed to smile at me with mild mockery; he might have been amused at my case. I had got into a pickle for him – as if he needed it. (115)

The homoerotic tone of the biographer's reflections on Jeffrey Aspern seems to inform his obsession with the author's papers. His investment in the project seems about more than just the papers. The obsessive nature of the pursuit is confirmed by the biographer by describing as a mere "pickle" his willingness to marry Miss Tina under false pretences to acquire these papers. And his suggestion that it is "for him" (for Jeffrey Aspern) begs the question as to why he initially thinks Aspern would need his intervention. Perhaps the biographer believes that this project may further Aspern's already illustrious reputation through the publication of new material on his personal life and connection to Miss Juliana Bordereau. The quest for the truth behind the actual intention of the fictional biographer's reasons for his ardent pursuit of the papers creates the interesting tension required to stimulate the reader's curiosity and thereby effectively enhance the dynamic between these literary or textual actors.

It will become clear later in the thesis that James' use of a fictional biographer can be related to his attempts to control his own literary reputation in a clandestine way, thus compromising to some extent what may be construed as "truth". This implicates him in manipulating the role of the fictional biographer for the purposes of his own reputation as a writer. His preface to the New York Edition (hereafter referred to as the NYE) of "The Aspern Papers" is relevant in this novella. James' revision process lends itself to the remaking of his œuvre. Philip Horne, in *Henry James and Revision*, observes that in the later NYE, "the narrator, a literary man, confesses near the end [as he does not in the earlier edition] that he failed to notice the change in Miss Tina because 'I had been too full of stratagems and spoils to think of that'" (NYE qtd. in Horne 141). This revision suggests that the narrator is focused solely on the acquisition of the papers, and, as such, means that his unreliability as a narrator is characterised by his inability to see the wood for the trees.

The complexity of writing fictional biography in relation to the ethics and aesthetics of literary biography is made clear in James' preface to *The Ambassadors*, where James

prefers to avoid “the terrible fluidity of self-revelation.” According to Philip Weinstein, “James penned this phrase as a warning against the lurking treachery of first-personal narrative” (216). James advocates for the depersonalisation of the author – an emphasis which is relevant to the use of the figure of the unnamed fictional biographer in “The Aspern Papers”, yet there is an intriguing connection between James’ use of a fictional examination of literary biography and his own subsequent actions, which to some extent negates his desire to be incognito. For example, James’ burning of Fenimore Woolson’s letters and his own documents at Lamb House suggests a curious kind of prescience connected to the burning of the papers by Miss Tina in “The Aspern Papers”. As Lyndall Gordon notes in *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and his Art*, James himself made a bonfire of his correspondence late in 1909:

> There are many burnt letters in the works of Henry James. Aspern’s papers go into the fire one by one, a woman’s denial of a man who would appropriate them and a record of their passion without offering the reciprocity of real attachment. (370)

This action clearly is meant to act as a deterrent, in James’ case, of any untoward detail from his private correspondence being made public or misconstrued. Yet the case of Miss Tina’s burning of the Aspern papers signifies a will to truth, though not literary truth: Miss Tina will not concede to the biographer’s wooing under false pretences for the unscrupulous reason of his procurement of the Aspern papers, but rather she rightfully demands sincere associations with the same.

James’ interest in what it means to be an artist and what it means to create a life around the artist is clear in his *Stories of Writers and Artists*. In “The Real Right Thing”, James resists the notion of having any kind of biographer, suggested in his autobiographical *A Small Boy and Others* in his attempt to reimagine his own past.

This also speaks to James' complex thoughts regarding life-writing. F.O. Matthiessen suggests in the introduction to *Stories of Writers and Artists* that

> The value of James' figure may be judged, as he insisted, only if it is sought out through his work as a whole. Only thus may be decided whether his scruples and renunciations are a sterile emptiness, or the guides to a peculiarly poignant suffering and inner triumph. (17)

Thus, to appreciate fully the link between the author and the fictional biographer and his subject (or other characters James may employ in his writing), extensive engagement with his wider œuvre is required. This becomes clear when considering James' contentions presented in "The Lesson of the Master", "The Real Right Thing", "The Death of the Lion" and "The Figure in the Carpet". According to James in *Stories of Writers and Artists* the latter story was "designed as a plea for mature criticism" (6). The ideal readers of this story were those for whom "literature was a game of skill", since "skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life" (6).

The author thus appears to employ the fictional biographer to distance himself from his work, to reflect on it, and perhaps to have a measure of control over how the work will be received (by the reader and the collective literary public) – the biographer is used as a means to reflect on a life of writing, on a life as a writer. In the James chapter of this thesis, the role of the fictional biographer is examined, establishing how it complements or subverts the author's "role" in the novella and other selected texts in terms of the metafictional devices James employs to explore these concerns. The central concern is James' possible manipulation of "truth" as he attempts to position or prepare his readers' interpretations to ensure a "suitable" reception of his work. Rosenblatt, in her article titled "Literature: The Reader's Role", reminds us that "Literature equals book plus reader" and so expresses that reader and text must work

together to find meaning (304). Vickery goes so far as to state that "James would agree with this to the extent that he as an author has led the reader to read in a particular way" (2). She justifies this position, quoting James from *The Art of the Novel*: "In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters" (2). There is a flow of information and knowledge in both directions. James' awareness of the possibility of the unskilled reader alluded to ealier also speaks to his realisation, as Vickery accurately points out, that the reader makes the author, too. Both are entwined in a reciprocity of meaning. Both are tied to and reliant on each other, seeking validation from each other that truth has been established and understood. This also means that truth (in this case the literary kind) must be agreed upon by author and reader for it to exist at all.

The works of Barthes, Foucault and Lejeune are useful in determining the autobiographical essence of the writing of Henry James, obscured and buried though these autobiographical moments may be from time to time. James' metafictional concerns reflect Barthes's suspicions of the author's biography, and his appreciation of the reader, in understanding a text. Yet James' works also reflect Foucault's claim that the author retains his authority if he can influence other texts. Finally, the author-reader relationship is paramount to Henry James' œuvre and LeJeune's "autobiographical contract" (which describes the agreement between autobiographer and reader that the content being consumed is true) underpins exactly that postulation. Each of these theorists' contributions to the field of biography and literary criticism more generally will inform my reading of all my primary texts, and James' texts in particular.

3. Summertime by J.M. Coetzee (2009)

The fictional biographer in *Summertime*, Mr Vincent, is ostensibly writing the life of the late John Coetzee – who is someone who resembles the real author of *Summertime*,

the novel itself, but in quite limited and suspicious ways. Vincent's methods include interviews with five people who knew the author when he was alive; he focuses on the period of his subject's life in which "he was trying to find his feet as a writer" (225), between 1972 and 1977. The five interviewees offer different perspectives on Coetzee. For example, Julia Frankl, a married woman and mother with whom he had an affair, proceeds to divulge in the first person much about her own life, and very little, in fact, about John Coetzee. The fictional biographer's metafictional role is evident when Julia confesses to him that she almost refused to speak to him as she thought he might be "some academic newshound… hoping to get some dirt on [John]" (35). This suggests that research on the life of a famous person may bring "truth" into question – it implies that although biographies may be written out of a sincere desire to establish a true, honest, factual representation of a life, they may also be written out of voyeuristic interest in salacious detail that may boost sales. The novel, in part, touches on how we have come to commodify lives by means of the (auto)biography (a point raised by James as well), with publishers and the reading public consuming such texts with the believing that readers may become intimately knowledgeable of the biographical subject, that textual space (depending on the content) functions in the same way as physical space. This assumption of intimacy is, of course, false.

Again, the fictional biographer seems to act as a catalyst for querying the complexities of life-writing, at the same time creating some kind of "objective" distance between the subject, the reader and the author. The use of third-person, "fourth-person" (where the biographer transcribes an interview and possibly interprets or exaggerates it), and even a "fifth-person" narration (where the biographer has conversations with his characters as he writes) furthers Coetzee's metafictional intent within the structural complexity of a biography or pseudo-autobiography. Furthermore, there is the question of how gender positions the reader's sympathies – Mr Vincent is a man, and his subject is a man too, yet four out of his five interviewees are women.

Mr Vincent's one male interviewee's contributions are so paltry by comparison so as to be somewhat negligible. Yet perhaps the intention is that Martin, the interviewee in question, provides responses that ought to act as a foil to the four women, in some cases playing up or reflecting Mr Vincent's possibly misogynist intentions (which some of the women articulate as well). Martin is to a large extent objective and queries Mr Vincent's methodology. He mentions the folly of possibly having a slanted account of "truth" because the women were emotionally attached to the subject. He goes on to query the wisdom of "doing a biography of a writer while ignoring his writing" (218). Here, the device of the fictional biographer ultimately becomes a ploy on J.M. Coetzee's part to "mislead" his readers about his life as a famous author and public figure.

Margot, John Coetzee's cousin, offers responses that are presented in the form of a transcription of the tapes of her conversations with Mr Vincent. When Mr Vincent reads his "transcription" back to her, she objects to his not having adhered to the "truth" and accuses him of exaggerating what she had said. The Brazilian woman Mr Vincent interviews, Adriana Nascimento, had refused to reciprocate Coetzee's sexual attentions during his life. She points out to the biographer that she had rejected his attempts at wooing her and had found him to be "tepid" (196), yet for Coetzee Adriana was a muse. Interestingly, the author engages with his character here, showing how infatuation can become a catalyst for creativity. The last woman Mr Vincent interviews, Sophie Denoël, is a French academic and former colleague of John Coetzee. She proceeds to understate Coetzee's importance and ability as a writer. Interspersed within the interviews are "Notebooks", passages from John Coetzee's notes and diary entries. The interviewer reads these Notebooks sceptically, wondering about their truth, because Mr Vincent insists that Coetzee was, primarily, a "fictioneer" (225). To this Sophie responds, "what if all the interviewees are fictioneers?" (226). Thus, a central concern of *Summertime* is certainly the theme of what exactly constitutes truth

in fiction or even in reality, going so far as to question not only the truth of the text, but also the truth of the texts that inform the text.

The impossibility of full disclosure or fully representing a life is central to Coetzee's paper entitled "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky", which argues that writing ends or becomes mundane where there is full disclosure. He states, "To Rousseau, his own desires are resources as long as they remain unique, hidden – in other words as long as they are potentially confessable. Brought into the public eye, they are revealed to be merely desires like everyone else's" (212). The author's truth and biography are not interesting per se; they are interesting to the reader only insofar as they remain discrete. In *Summertime*, Coetzee seems to be playing a game of fictional autobiography or autobiographical fiction, making his true self invisible (to some extent) by, interestingly, obscuring the truth behind interviews and biographical research, the materials traditionally relied upon to illuminate a life. As Boyd Tonkin suggests, "*Summertime* trips between reality and invention, self and mask, with a literary grace that 'Coetzee' the hapless hoofer could never manage on the dancefloor" (*The Independent*). Justin Neuman purports in his article, "Unexpected Cosmopolitans", that Coetzee is "the 'fictioneer' whom we cannot trust (the book, after all, holds a counterfactual premise as its founding axiom)" (128).

This reinforces the complexity involved in life-writing, and the use of the fictional biographer may encourage the reader to accept the clandestine obscurity the author seeks. The insertion of the self by the author into a text where he is fictionally deceased allows for "honest" responses from semi-fictional interviewees, which in turn lends credibility to the account given, as well as creating a public memory of the self. The author seems to make himself visible, yet he leaves out some details. For example, no mention is made of Coetzee's wife, Philippa, when he lives in Tokai Road in *Summertime*, yet J.C. Kannemeyer (Coetzee's real biographer) points out, in *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, that, regarding them both, "they settled in Tokai road, Tokai"

(233). The author paradoxically becomes invisible even in the face of the facts already known about him. Angel Gurrìa-Quintana states that, in *Summertime*, the author is "perversely playful with the fact/fiction ratio, as to confound readers who confuse authors and their characters" (*Financial Times*). And it is a ratio of the two that describes Coetzee's play with the two concepts. Coetzee shows us that the two concepts do not exist in binaristic opposition to each other. Rather he uses them to both inform each other (the fiction is used to enhance the fact and vice versa), but also to send up our appreciation and reading of the other. To extrapolate from this, Coetzee seems to imply that this is not merely how his novel functions, but how all (auto)biography performs.

Roland Barthes's concept of the "death of the author" is played with in *Summertime* – Coetzee is not dead, but through the fictional biographer and the interviewees he comments on his own writing, thereby framing the reader's reception of his work. Yet the author stands alongside the reader, who is also aware of the slippages between metaphor and literal truth regarding Coetzee's biographical information, is also aware of how the novel obviously does not suggest a literal death of the author, but may rather be playing with one's tendency to misread the character in the text as the person in real life. Mr Vincent has never met his (fictional) subject and is free to write as he wishes about him, yet the device gives Coetzee the ability to explore the weaknesses and limits of biography in a semi-clandestine way where one as the reader is aware of the fiction and factual element in the narrative.

The structure of the five interviewees' narrative voices, along with the dated and undated "fragments" of notes, ostensibly written by the biographical subject, can also be analysed through Backscheider's assertion that "strong narrative" is "a mode of understanding, a structure within which questions are raised and answers tested, a fiction of possibilities and hypotheses" (11). If, for Backscheider, "selecting, establishing, and maintaining the voice of the biography is the most personal decision

biographers make and the aspect of the book requiring the most sustained effort" (29), then what are the implications for a polyvocal text like *Summertime*?

Each interviewee – Julia, Adriana, Margot, Martin, and Sophie – is given individual analysis. Stylistically, the Julia section is written as the transcript of her answers to the biographer's questions – the style of the questions is formal and direct, but the style of Julia's responses is colloquial and more relaxed. The reader is given insight into the interviewee's character: she is witty, playful, and not afraid to discuss her intimate relationship with Coetzee. We are thus more acutely conscious of the authorial self-deprecation when it occurs. Yet Mr Vincent's deliberate prompting, through carefully selected questions, foreshadows the expected answers – and so to some extent the "real, live" Coetzee remains elusive and distanced from the reader.

The Margot section is particularly interesting as the fictional biographer adopts a mode that may be termed "fourth-person" narration – Mr Vincent reads Margot's responses from a previous interview back to her. As Neuman suggests, the implication of the fictional biographer's methodology should be examined because, "within the interviews, [Mr] Vincent emerges as an untrustworthy custodian at best of stories about Coetzee. He rewrites one interview as a narrative in the subject's voice (an intervention he admits is 'fairly radical') and then reads it back to her while recording her protestations and disapproval. Neuman continues: "[Mr] Vincent is an academic of mediocre creativity, a younger man who has never met Coetzee [and] ignores repeated rejections of his methodology" (131). The recording of Margot's protestations of Vincent's exaggerations (he says to her, "I'll fix it. I'll tone it down") results in a 'fifth-person' narrative (Coetzee, *Summertime* 119).

The Martin and Sophie sections, as well as the notes framing the novel, are written in the third person – Coetzee's former colleagues, as literary academics, are allowed to offer a critique on the art of writing biography. Their responses to the fictional

biographer allow for an overt metafictional stance to be taken by the author. It is significant that Coetzee has the male colleague Martin question Mr Vincent on how he chose his interviewees – especially the women with whom his subject had had emotional ties. He asks, "Shouldn't that give you pause?" (218). The reader is positioned by Coetzee to consider the writing of the author rather than the "personal and the intimate" (218) aspects of his life. When Martin blatantly askes Mr Vincent a sexist question, about whether the women interviewees have been emotionally involved with Coetzee, Vincent admits they had been. This prompts Martin to ask if their contribution would amount "to anything more than women's gossip?" (218). The role that gender plays in the information divulged in biography is explored in *Summertime* through Martin's questioning of the biographer's art, and thus clandestinely the authorial critique of the same is evident, as is an insinuation of how gender affects reader sympathy.

Neuman insists that "Coetzee remains consistent in his belief that the private life of a writer could and probably should be dismissed as irrelevant information" (132). He also points out "the young Coetzee['s]" assertion that "the writer's life is of 'only biographical interest'" (133). Coetzee's dismissive claims about reading the life of the writer into the writer's work are useful in determining what kinds of (biographical) truth we can and cannot read into a text.

Roland Barthes's essential maxim of "The Death of the Author" is taken quite literally in *Summertime*, and lends itself to analysis on numerous levels, both serious and humorous, involving the role of Coetzee's biographer and his anticipated reader's reception of the "fact-fiction" interplay within biographical writing. Coetzee forces us to confront our preconceived public and private views of the author's persona. *Summertime* reflects Virginia Woolf's "new biography" assertion in which Woolf writes against the idea that a biography must not be "a cold, dull inventory of facts" (151). Furthermore, Philippe Lejeune's views on the relationship between the author and

reader, the novel and autobiography, and how the mingling of truth and fiction become a vehicle for the portrayal of the truths of human nature, will prove relevant to the fictional biographer's role in this primary text.

4. A.S. Byatt

4.1. The Biographer's Tale (2000)

In *The Biographer's Tale*, the fictitious Phineas G. Nanson, a student in literature, gives up the theoretical world of postmodern literary criticism to become the biographer of another fictitious biographer, Scholes Destry-Scholes, who is famous for having written the fictitious biography of Sir Elmer Bole (also fictional). Phineas researches meticulously the revered biographer's life only to find he (the biographee) has not always been truthful and the mystery of his life and death remains so. Phineas finds a photograph that depicts the boat in which Destry-Scholes had been sailing before disappearing in the notorious Norwegian Maelstrøm, and the photograph does not reveal any information about the author's death. This causes the academic to despair as he realises that biographical accuracy or "truth" in itself is a questionable ideal. Consequently, Phineas becomes a character in a text that turns into his own *Bildungsroman*, an outcome which he had all along been trying to avoid.

The reader is shown how Phineas investigates Destry-Scholes, finding unpublished manuscripts of Linnaeus, Sir Frances Galton and Hendrik Ibsen (Destry-Scholes' biographical subjects) as well as a shoebox full of index cards. He goes on to form romantic relationships with Vera Alphage, a radiologist, and Fulla Biefeld, a bee taxonomist. Both women assist him in some way with his research as he attempts to find facts and concrete realities of his subject's life. Byatt is clearly questioning the validity of "truth" and "fact" in the writing of biography but, more specifically, she investigates how one can achieve this using a fictional biographer – deliberately fusing fact and fiction in an aesthetically pleasing form.

According to Mary Kaiser in her review of the novel in *World Literature Today*, "As Nanson begins his pursuit of Scholes's life story, Byatt reflects on the role of the biographer, and on the balance of restraint and fictive license in great biography" (145). She goes on to suggest that the inclusion of photographs of the characters in the novel makes it look like "a 'real' biography", suggesting that "fact and fiction coexist in any narrative" (145). Louisa Anne Hadley, in her essay entitled "Victorian Biography and *The Biographer's Tale*", states:

> The inadequacy of biographical discourse for considerations of identity is enacted in the novel through the blurring of the boundaries between biography, autobiography and fiction. The complexity of Byatt's narrative structure in *The Biographer's Tale* enables her to present differing versions of biography and fictional biography. (6)

The effect the fictional biographer has on the relationship between author, biographer, subject and reader is a major consideration in *The Biographer's Tale*, too, where the writings of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography* will here prove useful. Elements of the "real" and the recognisable or familiar, such as photographs, are paramount. Phineas explains that, according to Barthes, "every photograph is a certificate of presence" (qtd. in *The Biographer's Tale* 87). Photography plays an important role in the novel because, not only does the protagonist refer directly to Roland Barthes's theories on photography, but Destry-Scholes and Vera Alphage are shown to have interest in photographs too. Interestingly "Vera" means truth in Latin, and perhaps Vera's fascination with the precise inner structure of her radiographical photography again points to the quest for inner truth, albeit a metaphorical representation of this truth. Thus, photography in its many forms becomes a metaphysical conceit in the writing of a life where, according to L.A. Hadley, "the role of photography in the novel will enlighten its position on biography" (9). The use of

photography is pertinent to the quest for truth because it can provide visual evidence of the existence of a person or event. Phineas is desperate for proof of Destry-Scholes's factual existence, and he believes photographs hold sway as concrete sites of reality. However, he ironically becomes a plausible site of "reality" himself in exposing his life in the process of attempting to expose the lives of others.

The prominence of the first-person narrative throughout the novel is vital in the portrayal of the figure of the fictional biographer in *The Biographer's Tale*. Celia Wallhead, in "Metaphors for the Self in A.S. Byatt", writes that "it is through writing that one searches for identity.... Phineas becomes a new man through his experiences in search of another man's self... and biography is a search for the hidden self" (4). On close examination, it is evident that Phineas is the central character in the novel rather than his chosen biographical subject, Scholes Destry-Scholes. Throughout the novel the reader is conscious of hearing Phineas's voice as his life story unfolds and he eventually does find himself.

L.A. Hadley remarks that "Byatt highlights the absence of biographer in both biography and biographical fiction" (7), yet the reader is made wholly conscious of the fictional biographer here. Thus, it is the voice of the fictional biographer that establishes a relationship with the reader. Backscheider purports, "In choosing a voice, a point of view, biographers decide their relationship to the reader, to the subject, and to the genre, above all, they decide on how much of themselves to make audible" (xx). This may be set against the metafictional implication of Destry-Scholes's quotation of Ibsen: "To write is to sit in judgement of oneself" (qtd. in *The Biographer's Tale* 80). Since writing involves "division and self-division" (81), biography becomes autobiography as the self that narrates is divided. Similarly, Phineas's interest in the identity of his biographical subject is dependent on establishing an identity for himself first, as he claims that "I am not good at finding out who Destry-Scholes was because I am not very interested in finding out who I am" (100). This is a somewhat paradoxical

contention: the fictional biographer, Phineas, establishes this "truth" about his subject *through* himself (and perhaps vice versa), perhaps distancing himself from his subject if he must use himself as a conduit to establish truth about another.

Boccardi, citing Byatt's lecture, "Identity and the Writer" (1987), states that one of Byatt's aims is "to expunge the presence of the self, the presence of the 'I' from [her] idea of writing" (13). Christien Franken reads Byatt's claim as a dislike for "the writer as somebody who autobiographically expresses him- or herself in fiction" (qtd. in Boccardi 29), when instead writing serves (or should serve) as "an escape from self towards the imagination of other worlds, other people's minds, lives, feelings and thoughts" (Boccardi 29). The role of the fictional biographer is laid bare here, as the author can disappear into her mouthpiece for her metafictional considerations. The "I" clearly refers to Phineas rather than the author, and he symbolises that very escape from self to the worlds of other people through the imagination. Yet there is tension in the novel when, along with Phineas, we discover that his interrogation of Destry-Scholes' life was really just a study of his own life. Phineas, sympathetically characterisesd by Byatt, writes Phineas as an "I". However, in keeping with Byatt's philosophical objections in the art of biographical writing, Phineas is only able to discover his "I" through the "I" of another. Phineas only inadvertently discovers himself.

4.2. Possession (1990)

The Biographer's Tale is a text that can be both twinned with and contrasted with Byatt's earlier novel *Possession*. As Erin O'Connor puts it, *The Biographer's Tale* is "an academic quest narrative [that] picks up where *Possession* left off", becoming

> in many ways an inversion of [the] story about Roland Michell, a graduate student whose plodding thesis work takes a career-making turn

> when he makes a series of unexpected discoveries about the life and love of a Victorian poet. Michell's research brings him intellectual joy, true love, and job offers, but Nanson's attempt to write the life of a great biographer stops painfully short of such rewards. (379)

Ultimately Phineas's search for truth regarding his subject transforms into his understanding of the fine lines drawn between biography and autobiography.

Possession comes with a subtitle: "A Romance", and the plot of the novel entails alternating between romantic episodes within two timeframes: the erstwhile romance of two fictional mid-nineteenth-century Victorian poets, and a budding romance between two contemporary academics, Roland Michell and Dr Maud Bailey, who are researching the lives of Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte respectively. *Possession* has multiple fictional biographers and researchers – both men and women – who are eager to "possess" all the information they can find on Randolph Henry Ash. Professor Mortimer Cropper is the biographer and antagonist as he is willing to forego all semblance of moral conduct to secure Ash's papers – even to the point of robbing Ash's grave – and Michell is the part-time research assistant to the editor of Ash's poetry, Professor Blackadder. Michael McGoodwin points out that Byatt's introduction, discussing how she wanted to write about "'the relations between living and dead minds'" explains, by way of rhetorical question, the double meaning of the title: "does the literary scholar possess the author who is the object of her research or vice versa?" (McGoodwin 2).

The use of multiple fictional "scholarly" voices in *Possession* is, like in *Summertime*, a polyvocal experiment by the author, and a means to distance herself (the autobiographical Byatt) from the text even though her intellectual presence is evident. This is an interesting point of departure when considering Coetzee's multiple selves, divulged by the numerous interviewees recounting his "life" in *Summertime* (or indeed,

as will become clear when discussing *Absolution*, where the multiple selves of Sam Leroux are divulged in the four narrative streams).

Such comparative possibilities amongst the five primary texts will further elucidate the role of the figure of the fictional biographer. The same applies to sex, sexuality and gender. Byatt's characters Henry Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte (both published poets), along with Ash's wife Ellen Best Ash (who wrote a Personal Journal and a book called *Helpmeets*), seem to affirm both professional equality and acceptance of one another as equals in love. Maud Bailey and Roland Michell are both PhDs and their equally passionate research into the past lives of Ash and LaMotte pose the interesting question as to what Byatt may be satirising. Byatt seems to question established gender roles through the fictional researchers and their sexual orientations, especially given the interest in LaMotte and Blanche Glover's covert lesbian relationship. However, Boccardi suggests that

> [t]he normative heterosexual relationships of Ash and LaMotte, Roland and Maud, are invested with power that is denied to the attempts to affirm an alternate homosexual identity by the inarticulate Blanche Glover or the comically formidable Professor Stern. (69-70)

The role of the fictional biographers or editors then, may specifically be used to query the critique proffered regarding gender roles. Boccardi continues: "The literary text, the creative faculty of the artist, is thus once again privileged over the critical endeavour; this explains, for instance, why Roland Michell's ultimate reward at the end of his quest in *Possession* is the discovery of an original poetic vein," (136) even if "He was writing lists of words that resisted arrangement into sentences of literary criticism or theory. He had hopes – more, intimations of imminence – of writing poems, but so far had got no further than lists. These were, however, compulsive and desperately important" (Byatt 431). Byatt's own writing mirrors this process of recalling several

other others and texts in the creation of her own work (Boccardi 136). Nonetheless, Byatt's employment of fictional biographers must be situated within what Keen identifies in *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* as "several narrative strategies associated with the postmodern style, most notably pastiche, self-reflexivity, and ironic doubling" (32-33).

Byatt's texts embody fiction and real facts in imaginary constructs to arrive at specific literary truths, through deliberate metafictional machinations. Virginia Woolf's significance in Byatt's writing is clear as she exposes stereotypically accepted literary critiques through using the very constructs she is lambasting in order to affirm her metafictional intent. For instance, in *The Biographer's Tale* Byatt toys with Woolf's claim of truth having "granite solidity" and personality "as something of rainbow intangibility" ("The New Biography" in *Granite and Rainbow* 149). And *Possession* utilises Woolf's "manipulation of facts" so that "the light of personality may shine through" (150) to reflect "not only the outer life of work and activity but the inner life of emotion and thought" (151). Foucault's contention that a text is never original, and his insistence on the influence of intertextuality where authors maintain their authority, is evident in both texts. Lejeune's stand that the novel helps us to come closer to (biographical) truth more than autobiography allows is alluded to in both Byatt's texts referred to in this thesis. The characters who attempt to write biography reveal more of themselves than their subjects – it is not necessarily Byatt the author into which we have greater insight by the end of those novels (where discovering more of Byatt is not the aim of this project).

5. *Absolution* by Patrick Flanery (2012)

Sam Leroux is the biographer commissioned to write about Clare Wald, a famous author, also a product of Flanery's imagination. The novel has four distinct narrative

voices. Sam narrates his “present day” encounter with the famous author in the first person – he becomes a protagonist, and his own life is revealed as having been inextricably bound up in his subject’s past. The novel questions the effects of what might be termed post-traumatic stress and how the characters come to terms with past suffering, where personal guilt may be interpreted as a burden on a microcosmic level and yet may well have profound implications for society on a macrocosmic level.

Wald requests Sam to be her biographer for personal reasons. She is expiating her guilt for a past transgression against him, when she did not take him in (at her daughter’s request) after he had been orphaned – firstly having lost his politically active parents through a bomb blast and then, under questionable circumstances, having lost his abusive guardian. Clare also has other motives: she hopes that through him she might glean some information about the disappearance of her daughter, Laura, whom she believe to be an anti-apartheid activist.

Sam, as the fictional biographer, becomes the orchestrator of more than one narrative in the novel. In doing so, he provides space for the acknowledgement of past traumas or transgressions to facilitate the possibility for absolution – or at least acknowledgement of the need for absolution – that is sought by both protagonists. This role requires investigation to establish how “fact” (within the fictional construct) and fiction (Clare Wald is ostensibly writing a new book called *Absolution* which she insists is a fiction) intermingle to support the aesthetic of the postmodern construct. Within such a construct, numerous truths exist simultaneously, and memory forms an integral part of the metafictional principle. Thus, the act of writing itself is questioned. Clare was a censor for the apartheid government, and she manipulates her own writing. She tells Sam,

> I spent decades writing in such a way to avoid having my books banned.... Is that the confession you were hoping to extract – that I

> consciously wrote to stay in print? I did. I don't consider it a crime. I consider it a means of survival, a coping mechanism, in the language of pop psychology, and one at which I seem to have excelled. (46)

To provide for her family, it would seem her metafictional approach became a necessity rather than purely academic exploration. Flanery points out the following in a 2013 interview:

> The complex narrative structure of *Absolution* serves to highlight one of its central thematic concerns: the nature of truth and memory.... The excerpts of Clare's new book, *Absolution*, are also suspect, as the third-person narration (not to mention the classification of the book as fiction) allows Clare the detachment to fictionalise her own memories. (9)

In the novel Clare Wald points out the following: "That is why the book, as you will discover, is so distanced and distancing. What safer way to write about the self than from a distorting distance?" (269). It becomes clear that Flanery is raising metafictional concerns through Sam's interrogation of the author, who tries to explain the concept of authorial distancing through the inclusion of what is meant to be fiction yet is clearly linked to the "factual" role of fictional biographer, who instigates questions about the art of writing itself. This will be compared to *Summertime*, where Coetzee explores the impact of multiple voices or narratives that pertain to his past, and how this accommodates the distancing of the author from the reader. Furthermore, the Jamesian connection will also be included in this comparison, as similar implications are suggested in the chapter on "The Aspern Papers".

In an interview in 2014, Flanery noted that he was, "in part", also "trying to write into the novel some of what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) sought to do: that is, to allow for multiple *kinds* of truth" which had different, clearly defined functions

(*Q&A* n.p.). This statement is significant when considering the role of Sam Leroux in the novel. In the chapter on *Absolution*, I show how Sam becomes an exploratory catalyst for Flanery's contention above.

In addition to this, Flanery warns readers of the precarity of "truth". He states: "Assume nothing. Read attentively, but also read sceptically, which is to say, do not assume that truth is ever being spoken by a character. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't" ("The English Experience" 7). The complexity of the four narrative strands, and the use of either the first- or third-person, interrogate whether the reader should be accepting the perspectives presented as reliable accounts of events. In the "Sam" chapters, Sam as biographer tells his story in the present tense and uses the first-person as he describes meeting his subject and reflects on her nature. The action of the novel is thus set in motion. The "Absolution" chapters, which denote excerpts from Sam's subject's new book by the same name, are written in the third-person, providing a detached view of Clare Wald's previous experiences that she herself classifies as "fiction". The "Clare" chapters are written in journal form – in the first-person – and are meant to be a possible account of what may have happened to her missing daughter, Laura. But later in the novel it becomes clear that the notebook Clare uses for this purpose was fabricated by Laura to put her mother's heart at ease. The final voice narrates chapters titled by dates (1989,1989-98,1998-99 and 1999) written in the third-person and based on Sam's memories of what occurred. This method becomes a vehicle for Flanery's questioning of the nature of truth and memory, because, as he points out, "people with shared experiences remember things differently" ("The English Experience" 6).

In the final chapter, Clare points out to Sam,

> First, that history is not always correct, because it cannot tell all the stories that have been, cannot account for everything that has

> happened.... Second, that the record of memory, even a flawed memory, has its own kind of truth. Perhaps the literal truth is not what you have remembered but the truth of memory is no less accurate in its way. (377)

Through the fictional biographer, it is possible for the author to explore the concepts of truth and memory to indicate their vacillating nature, and clandestinely to remind "the reader that no individual version of the 'truth' can be accepted without question" (247).

Absolution reflects the views of Virginia Woolf, Michael Foucault and Phillippe Lejeune in an interesting way, cleverly achieving the blending of the "freedom of fiction and the substantiation of fact" yet maintaining credibility (Lange 255). The collocation of past and present juxtaposes fact and fiction in a credible framework to establish the truth, albeit multiple truths through the incorporation of the fictional biographer.

6. Choice of texts

The reason for the choice of these specific texts is that they are the most interesting of very few instantiations of novels that interrogate the role of the biographer in a work of fiction. Their contextual variation (spanning different literary eras across different parts of the world) deepens this interest. "The Aspern Papers" is set in Venice, *The Biographer's Tale* and *Possession* in the United Kingdom, and *Summertime* and *Absolution* are intrinsically South African, yet all the novels grapple with the biographical art form of life-writing as a creative endeavour where a fictional biographer is a pivotal driving force for exploring the concept of the truth of a life, especially when rendered in fiction. With each author aware of her or his text's setting, the geographical diversity of the texts offers a rich discussion on how truth of a life lived is expressed or obscured in this or that culture, this or that period or political

context. This is especially interesting when considering the South African texts in this study with Coetzee and Flanery's novels the most obviously political of the set of primary texts.

The central aspect of "truth" and fiction being a coexistent feature in writing is paramount to the comparative element of this study, as each text has as its central character a fictional biographer whose main concern involves metafictional considerations. Yet these metafictional considerations often become bound up in (modernist and postmodernist) questions of history: history as text; history of text; text about history; text as history; historical texts about textual historicity; and so forth. Byatt of course presents her fictional biographers' research into the past, and in *Possession* recreates that past for the reader; James has his unnamed fictional biographer search for past papers of the dead Aspern in "The Aspern Papers"; and Flanery's biographer, Sam Leroux, is haunted by his past. Thus, there is a confluence of the present and past that accounts for interesting metafictional observations.

The South African-British location of the primary texts' authors (and South African-Australian location in Coetzee's case and Flanery being American, and living in Britain and the US) lends itself to the exploration of the way writers connect to past and nationally different historical figures, with some historical figures real and others not. The variety of texts and the use of different types of literary criticism in this thesis – such as reader-response criticism and psychoanalytic criticism – provides a platform for a distinction to be made between modernism and postmodernism. In Victorian biography writing, the prominence of the authorial figure is paramount, whereas in later biography writing, modernists, postmodernists and poststructuralists undermine this assumption of authorial prominence and singularity. This lends itself to including further exploration of the assumptions of the postmodern "reader-writer contract" and the question of the presence of the author in the work. Michel Foucault suggests in "What is an Author" that "criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance – or

death – of the author some time ago" (102). He goes on to suggest that one might conceive of writing as "a question of creating space into which the writing subject constantly disappears" with the result that "the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than a singularity of his absence" (102-103). These aspects of critical theory are expounded in the theoretical chapter and assist in providing the necessary key words or central insights required to dissect the primary texts, particularly for their modernist and postmodernists contexts.

These texts, then, have been chosen once because of their commonality: they are all interested in the fictional biographer and use this figure to interrogate the assumed centrality of the author in works of fiction, thereby inviting us to consider questions of the elements that comprise fiction. And they have been chosen again because of their diversity: each is not a mere meditation on the fictional biographer, per se, but also a consideration beyond that; each may have something interesting to offer on, say, the nature of gender, race, celebrity, or nationality in relation to the figure of the fictional biographer. All these considerations serve to interrogate what it means to have lived a life and have that life represented in narrative by someone other than oneself.

Chapter 1: The Philosophy of Life-Writing

Each of the novels in this project are aware of their place within a long line of literary enquiry, they are aware of the fashions in narrative form, and they express an awareness of the different ways truth may be rendered. This is true of how these texts respond to the novel form more generally, and how they respond to the ways in which (real) life has been portrayed in text, especially as it was done in the last two hundred years or so. Each of the texts looks upon the biographer now with suspicion, at times with derision, and now with sympathy; they recognise that the history of the biographer is a varied one, with the history of biographical writing expressing the same kind of variation by extension.

The philosophical writings drawn upon to frame an understanding of the novels span much of the twentieth century: Virginia Woolf's "The Art of Biography" (1939); Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1968); Philipe Lejeune's "The Autobiographical Contract" (1975); and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1979). All of these essays postdate Henry James' "The Aspern Papers" (who published his story for the first time towards the end of the nineteenth century), though I say this only as a matter of context and not to suggest that the philosophical texts used in this dissertation are any less relevant because of it. The remaining texts were published often well after the essays mentioned, with some authors directly or indirectly citing these essays and their legacies, this suggests philosophical inferences are not time dependent.

Woolf's and Lejeune's essays are often cited in discussions on the forms and assumptions about biography and autobiography. But of these four texts, Barthes's and Foucault's are the slightly less obvious inclusions since they have to do with author identity in relation to writing more generally than they do with the identity of the author as she is represented in the mode of (auto)biography. Yet the playful nature of the texts in this study necessitates that we understand, also, the identity of the author even

within the contexts of fiction about biography. That is to say that these works (more readily than others) show how the author begins to write herself into the work of fiction, often as a provocation to the reader to try to "find" the true author among the lies the author puts forth in the text, among the fiction. Though this is most true of *Summertime*, the provocation is present in varying degrees in the other texts, too. To begin with, I will introduce Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and Foucault's "What is an Author?", since these essays express interest in the identity of the author more generally.

Roland Barthes's 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author", argues against traditional literary criticism's practice of using the author's biography to explain the meaning of a text. The reference to the "death" of the author implies the absence of the author from the text. He states,

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (142)

For Barthes, the author dies when fiction begins. The author (who exists in the real world, the reader's world) dies when the fiction severs itself from the real world and creates a world unto itself. From this, there comes about "the birth of the reader" who is given the power to interpret the text in her own individual way (148) – reading affords this fictional world with shape and complexity; the fictional does not exist without the reader's intervention and engagement. The author is not the authoritative figure in this fictional world as this would "impose a limit on the text as the author's name becomes the signifier of finality" (Hanson). Barthes points out, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147). He argues further that a text is multidimensional and that "The text is a tissue of

quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (146) that enter into "mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation…. [Yet] this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (148). Meaning, in this sense, is unidirectional for Barthes. The author gathers culture, mediates between all the texts that have come before and the texts she writes, and the reader is the final point in this trajectory of writing. Meaning flows from culture to author, and the reader must do the work of synthesising this information.

Among much else, the onus of determining the "truth" of the text (if such truth may be determined at all), is left up to the reader. If the author is dead, in the sense that Barthes means, then "truth" is embedded in the text not at the point of writing, but of reading. Truth is generated through reading. But this is not to say that truth is relative: truth is generated through the interplay of text and the reader's interpretation of that text. These contentions are explored in each novel, raising interesting correlations with the roles the different fictional biographers play in each text, ultimately contributing to the literary "truth" being sought by both the author – present or absent – and reader, often hinted at by the relationship with the fictional biographer.

Michel Foucault, in "What is an Author?", argues essentially that an author retains her authority if she can influence others. This assertion contradicts Roland Barthes who maintains that it is the reader, not the author, who is "present" and authoritative. For Barthes the author must necessarily be absent so as not to limit the interpretation of the text. Foucault argues that authors do have a sense of power and that "they have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts" (170). The author and her text are located in a chain of meaning, each link a text generating its own truth that influences the truth of the text that comes after. That is, he purports that even though authors have not had a fully original idea, they still have a sense of authority (especially as the reading public would perceive it); their work might influence another author to write something similar, thus creating intertextuality.

This creates a sense of literary tradition or lineage. Foucault emphasises that "any text is the construction of a mosaic of quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (206).

To frame this from what came before, we may understand Foucault's position as one that adds to the chain of reading introduced to us by Roland Barthes's. Where Barthes showed that meaning flows from culture to author to reader, Foucault agrees, but extends this by emphasising, also, that meaning is generated in every text since to influence (to lesser or greater degrees) texts that come after. Thus the meaning from culture to author to reader idea is implied in Barthes's text and crystalised in Foucault's.

These ideas manifest the quest for covert or overt truths in James and Byatt and are explored with reference to the specific fictional biographers' and authors' significance in their texts. For instance, in Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* Phineas G. Nanson as the fictional biographer describes his subject Scholes Destry-Scholes as being one who "was very good at finding out other personages, but left no tracks of who he was" (100). This hints at Barthes's idea of the death of the author, and yet there is much in the narrative's intertextual revelations to corroborate Foucault's contention that authorial power has allowed for the production of something new in the world. Byatt's scholarship is unquestionable despite having been influenced by other writers. Her original inclusion of numerous illustrious authors such as Ibsen and Beckett, through creatively reworking the essence of their work, serves her own metafictional experimentation.

In an essay titled "The Art of Biography", Virginia Woolf expounds what the aim of biography is. She quotes from Sir Sydney Lee, a prolific biographer and reader of his day, that the aim of biography "is the truthful transmission of personality" (qtd. In Woolf *Granite and Rainbows* (149). Yet Woolf argues that,

> On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And [we may] think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole…. (149)

Woolf clearly suggests that the superior "new" form of biography is no longer bound by dull, "cold and colourless" inventories of facts, but that in order that the "light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet in the process, they must never lose their integrity" (150). Although the power and virtue of truth are undeniable, Woolf shows that it is not only the "outer life of work and activity" that mostly reflects truth, but also "the inner life of emotion and thought" that contributes to a true picture of the subject (150). Thus, the art of biography is not static but a fluctuating medium of authorial expression a. Furthermore, she suggests that even the author or biographer himself becomes equal to his subject: "He is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal" (152). This is different from the Victorian notion of the subservient biographer of the illustrious subject, the latter usually described with a patriarchal slant.

Woolf's aim is to establish a truth that is not easily measurable; she is not interested in the kind of truth that is apparent on the surface of things, on what is obviously known about the biographical subject. Establishing the truth of the inner workings of her subject requires invention. Byatt enhances these Woolfian observations in *The Biographer's Tale* and *Possession*. The authors or the fictional biographers in the five novels under discussion here reflect a combining of fact and non-fact or pseudo-fact in imaginative renditions of the biographical construct. In doing so, they arrive at specific truths that the authors of the texts explore.

The difficulties of achieving this delicate coexistence of fact and fiction are necessary precisely because, as Woolf indicates, “it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act” (155). Achieving this balance requires the biographer’s imagination, requires the biographer “to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, [and] dramatic effect to expound the private life” (155). As Woolf further suggests, the “freedom of fiction” and the “substance of fact” must be blended carefully to maintain credibility, and she implies that “obstinate veracity” is necessary “so that we have implicit belief in what [the author] tells us” (155). This is directly related to a literary truth that is the product of any biographical or autobiographical text – whether they stand alone or whether they form a symbiotic relationship involving fact and fiction, they result in the creation of a new life-writing construct after the Victorian era.

Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, found in “The Autobiographical Contract”, plays in the tension that exists between literal truth as opposed to literary truth, and he includes the importance of personality within this play of truth. He states that “autobiography might be: a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (193). There are several telling words in this definition. The use of the subjunctive “might” implies that the definition is by no means conclusive. The word “retrospective” shows that the autobiography must always be looking back (one’s autobiography must always be based on that which has passed, and therefore on that which can be recorded – there can be no futural invention in autobiography), and “narrative” suggests the novelistic element of storytelling. The word “real” implies fact or the literal truth that one would expect from an autobiography, or at least a semblance of honesty. Similarly, J.M.Coetzee’s famous Autobiography-Fiction contention that “all autobiography is storytelling[fiction] and all storytelling[fiction] is autobiography” (Kannemeyer, 9), is reflected in Lejeune’s major concern – where he states, “A piece of autobiographical fiction can turn out to be

'exact', with the protagonist resembling the author; an autobiography can be 'inexact' with the individual described being different from the author" (203-4). The novels within this study play within this tension.

Lejeune has coined the term "the autobiographical contract", referring to "the name of the author on the cover... and which goes further to include a kind of contract between the author and the reader" (202). The kind of relationship between the two "in fact determines the attitude of the reader", and he suggests that we, as readers, always believe that what we think we have discovered from the text – despite the author – is truer and deeper (203). The reader believes she supersedes the author in creating meaning or determining truth (about the subject of the biography or autobiography). The thoughts of Lejeune echo those of Virginia Woolf where both suggest autobiography (or biography in the case of Woolf) require a combination of facts and personality; thus the truth of the subject relies on this symbiotic relationship.

"Truth" is a most signal concern for all authors. Lejeune emphasises through a pertinent statement that

> The novel helps us to come closer to truth than autobiography, if not the personal, individual, intimate truth of the author, that is, the very thing which is the object of any biographical project? So to speak, it is insofar as it is autobiography that the novel is declared to be closer to the truth. (216)

Thus, he suggests that the mingling of fiction and fact becomes a vehicle for the portrayal of the truths "of human nature" (216). Lejeune, in this passage, also shows his openness to the merging of forms; he does not abide by the black-and-white distinctions between life-writing and fiction, showing that there has been a well-worn practiced exchange between the two. To state that the two modes of representation

(novel and (auto)biography) are discrete from each other would be to deny that these kinds of text exist at all. Lejeune instead wisely describes what is already apparent in the storytelling world, using words like “autobiography” and “novel” merely as helpful terms by which we may frame an understanding of existing literature.

Lejeune is helpful for our reading of the texts herein, but it must be qualified that his arguments are construed with orthodox autobiography in mind – he uses this term and its associations to frame his understanding of how life-writing functions; his terms and definitions have not been developed for the use of reading fiction, which is what the texts in this study are first and foremost. That Lejeune declares that autobiography must utilise the tenets of fiction describes the point at which this analysis begins, especially in its recognition that a mixing of the two (fact and fiction) in the context of representing a life, is what makes these texts interesting. This gestures toward the kinds of thoughts expressed by Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, in *Borderlines*, in which the author argues that

> the relationship between the fictional and autobiographical aspects of life-writing can be a close one, as can be seen for instance in the close connection between memory, writing, and fiction, so that one would be hard pressed to define them as two distinct (and opposing) modes of discourse. The (trouble-causing) form, biography, and its sister genre, autobiography seem inevitably to oscillate between facts and fictions. (263)

It is this inevitability to which the texts in this study speak, as they demonstrate, through various means, how the assumption that there is a “borderline” between fact and fiction (especially when studying or reading life-writing) must always be contested; it is a borderline that must always be shown to be porous.

The quest for literary truth in the five primary texts is significant in this thesis and thus some explanation of the perception of the same seems pertinent from the outset. Literary truth is something that is true of a book and within the realm of literature – it is not the same as a truth about the outside world, the consensual reality. According to Irving Singer's explanation in *The Hudson Review*, truth is "a fact or belief that is accepted as true.... [I]t must be the same for everyone", whereas,

> [w]]hen we say that a novel has literary truth, we do not mean that it expresses something radically peculiar. We only mean that *within its framework as a novel* it gives us profound insights into the world, just as a psychological or sociological description might. (146)

Thus, for example, *The Biographer's Tale* expresses a literary truth in the sense that its central concern is the inadequacy of mere facts on their own, the "things" the biographer searches for, thwart his project to the extent that he abandons that search. There is a distinction between different truths here, upon which Singer expands:

> Literary truth is not a different kind of truth, and art does not disclose a different kind of Being. A work with literary truth portrays in fictional terms the actual world we live in. (Singer 146)

What Singer seems to be arguing against here is the implicit privileging of certain kinds of truth over others. The contention is the value we generally seek and favour of in the truth we find in facts as opposed to the truths we find in fiction. It may be framed slightly differently: it is the contention between the kinds of truths that are easily measurable (quantifiable truths, say) and those that are not (qualitative truths). The supposition is that measurable truths are prejudicially favoured because they are visible. Though both kinds of truth, according to Singer, are the same, especially in the sense that both strive to portray the world as it is. The only difference between them seems to lie in

the fact that they achieve truth using different avenues of enquiry. In each of the five chosen texts, truth is a driving force for the fictional biographer concerned.

Henry James, for example, has a unique perspective of who determines value and truth in a text that reflects the determined involvement of his reader in the sense that he, according to Vickery, "means for the reader to play an active part in the interpretation of truth" (1), using a technique of interior dialogue. She goes on to say that "James' evaluation of the art of writing and how it is interpreted by the reader may be used as a touch stone of value and truth" (1).

Thus, the centripetal focus of this argument is the concern with elements of "truth" and marrying it with fiction with special emphasis on the role of the fictional biographer. The latter's action in portraying various metafictional models ultimately endorses his or her metafictional function regarding the characteristics of life-writing. Consequently, the theory encountered in the five primary texts emerges as a lens through which it becomes possible to explore how biography has evolved since the Victorian era. Henry James, the earliest of the authors selected, seems a typical instantiation of the progenitor of high modern expressions of self and biography, where the other authors, at least in part, tread his path, offering an increased sense of play within a much larger global context typical of postmodernism or late modernism. In Wallhead's description of twentieth-century biography, she states the following:

> The last decades of the 20th century were witness to the phenomenon of the growing appeal of biography. But it has often been biography with a difference, for with the blurring of genres in these postmodern (or is it post-postmodern?) times, the work of some biographers has taken on the imaginative qualities of the novel for the purposes of rendering a 'truer' vision of the subject than a purely factual one might have given us.

(291)

The readers' demand for elements of truth in what is being read can be met because essentially biographies and autobiographies can offer exactly that: a combination of fact and fiction in narrative form, to arrive at novelistic truth as well as metafictional or indeed metaphysical truth.

I will endeavour to define modernism and postmodernism in rather general and fluid ways, anticipating that, while studying the chosen texts, conceptualisations of these terms will necessarily be adapted as I go along. The definitions of each term are not fixed so as to allow for more productive meanderings that too dogmatic definitions of the terms would not allow for. The granularity of each text will necessitate that such definitions be productively challenged (and in some instances done away with altogether). It is essential, though, at the start of this study, to locate these texts in the broad literary sweep to which they are generally said to belong.

Literature prior to this modernist period was essentially focused on romance and centred on nature, whereas modernism seems to have been a reaction to capitalism and urbanisation. Modernism rebelled against the clear-cut linear storytelling of the nineteenth century, culminating, after the First World War, in the fragmentation of several facets of the aspects of life assumed to be relative constants: society, class, the mind, the natural world, the state, sexuality (Malpaps 289).

To reflect this kind of fragmentation, modernist writing seemed to encompass multiple narrators, nonlinear plotlines and introspection, or the inner workings of characters and their consciousnesses (Butler, *Modernism* 10). Here the first-person perspective was used to highlight the ordinary man rather than illustrious heroic protagonists (Butler, *Modernism* 28). The individual was seen as more interesting than society, especially when the ordinary person adapted to and triumphed over the changing

world. There was a penchant for the formalism of language where writing was seen as a crafted art form rather than one based only on creative talent (Malpas 294). The presence of symbol is prevalent (Sandler 345). There was a focus on the themes of the negative consequences of capitalism, machinery and isolation and the alienation brought on by the mechanisation of productivity (Malpas 288). Yet modernist thinking does endorse a search for an abstract truth of life and tries to construct a coherent worldview, albeit through indirect means.

At the centre of much modernist fiction is an absence. To interrogate one point of interest, modernists would often write around this subject without ever looking at it directly. As a prototypical instantiation of this is Virgnia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*. The Lighthouse (capitalised throughout the text) is the landmark the Ramsay family speak of visiting while on holiday in the Isle of Skye, but they never manage to get to it, except in the novel's final pages, where the Lighthouse proves rather underwhelming and unfulfilling. Woolf, the archetypal modernist writer, uses the Lighthouse as a symbol in which her social and psychological preoccupations coalesce. The Lighthouse stands as a metaphor for Woolf's interests in the transition of the Edwardian family into the modern world, it is a symbol of knowledge and enlightenment, of patriarchy, of desire. That we never reach the Lighthouse in any meaningful sense is Woolf's attempt to demonstrate that none of these large and sweeping considerations may be captured by accessing them directly. They are elusive and mysterious, and to say anything about them can only ever be achieved poetically, obliquely. The truths of these matters, then, evade us at the attempt of definition.

Postmodernism is a post-World War 2 disenchantment with capitalism and politics and entails metafiction, writing about writing or making the reader aware of the fictionality of fiction, and often understood as a "continuation" of modernism (Kvale 19). It is a term that is often characterised as "amorphous", "ghostly" given its nebulous and

sometimes contradictory traits (Docherty 1). With its tendency to disrupt the texts upon which we rely to determine truth, postmodern literature believes there is no universal truth, abstract or otherwise (Malpas 295). Its authors do not believe in a coherent world view, and, as such, the literary movement removes the differences between high and low statuses of class distinctions and even art (Kvale 18). This literature uses unreliable narration and self-reflexivity; often historical and political themes abound, and there is a celebration of the flow of the subconscious mind (Kvale 21, 24; Docherty 5). Where modernists see fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as an existential crisis or Freudian conflict, postmodernists believed the only recourse is to play or make the best of what you have within this chaos (Kvale 25). The use of irony is evident throughout. Metafictional and intertextual incorporations, such as references from fairytale to Medieval romance, define postmodern texts as a mode reliant on pastiche, thereby facilitating the inclusion of multiple genres and temporal distortions where the historical and modern co-exist.

The above-mentioned characteristics are discernible in the five primary texts to a greater or lesser extent and in each case the role of the fictional biographer plays a central part in each nove. In “The Aspern Papers” by Henry James (as well as the four other novellas I will make reference to) I examine the interesting use of the first-person narrator and how James shifts his focus from the realist concerns of the Victorian era and incorporates modernist views in his metafictional approach to the idea of biographical research. The presence of symbol, and the focus on the inner working of the fictional biographer-editor and his consciousness are modernist elements that are alluded to in the text. The fragmented experience of the unnamed biographer and his extreme subjectivity in the narrative points to an existential crisis. In *Summertime* J.M. Coetzee plays with the concept of writing his own biography from a postmodern metafictional perspective. Suspending our disbelief, Coetzee pretends to be dead in the novel and teases the reader’s past public perceptions of himself by offering an almost denigrating view of the author (Coetzee) the reader assumes to know. A.S.

Byatt's novels *The Biographer's Tale* and *Possession* deftly incorporate many postmodern elements, but use them to critique the form themselves through intertextual referencing, pastiche, and the incorporation of metafiction. In *Absolution* by Patrick Flanery, postmodernism is perhaps most evident as it deals with historical and political issues in a postmodern world, using multiple narrative voices in the chaotic (post)colonial world of (post)apartheid South Africa.

In each novel the role of the fictional biographer is clearly relevant to each literary period and its use in the text and beyond the text is multifarious. However, because "The Aspern Papers" was written in the modernist period (or at least as it was beginning, as is generally accepted) and the other four primary texts were written in the postmodernist period, the study requires investigation as to whether a defining historical period would affect the role of the figure of the fictional biographer in writing.

Indeed, modernism and postmodernism are useful categories by which to frame an understanding of the texts concerned. Though sensitivity will be afforded to instances in which other kinds of frameworks are better suited to read the texts and their concerns regarding the fictional biographer and her or his pursuit of truth within the mode of biography. In *The Biographer's Tale*, Byatt is intent on sending up the category of postmodernism altogether, where the biographer's pursuits are sometimes foolishly rendered precisely because of his adherence to structuring his project through a postmodern lens. And in *Absolution*, it is South Africa's (post)colonial and (post)apartheid concerns that sway our reading of the text. To read each text solely within a modernist or postmodernist understanding would be to deny its nuance along other lines of reading.

Chapter 2: Henry James

In *Reflections on Biography*, as mentioned in the Introduction, Paula Backscheider points out that "biography is art" and the voice of the biographer, besides being the bridge between subject and reader, is all-powerful owing to the various roles required to be undertaken by the biographer or author in order to write a life. Paula Backscheider reiterates:

> Readers can see biographers as omniscient judges, skilled drivers of well-tuned machines, harmless drudges, or in the words of one very hostile critic, "a humanist machine of aggression". Above all, biographers are decision-makers whose decisions matter. (xxi)

On the "voice of the biographer", Backscheider states that, "in choosing a voice, a point of view, biographers decide [on] their relationship to the reader" (xx). These traditional definitions clearly pertain to what the role of the non-fictional or true biographer in writing is or was thought to be. From the quote above, the readers' role is important as their perception of the role of the biographer (true or fictional) will be either positive or negative. Thus, the biographer has the power to disseminate details about his subject, thereby creating a persona or text identity of the subject whom he possibly does not know personally. This fact affects the reader's response or expectation of the work which is underpinned by the power-play between the author and the reader. This is enormously pertinent to the work of Henry James.

The fictional biographer becomes a fictional character in the written work, gathering information as editor or the biographer writing the life of either a fictional or real-life person. This unique mode of the fictional incorporation of a biographer character raises numerous philosophical, psychological and stylistic questions on a metaliterary level. In this chapter, I explore how the figure of the fictional biographer may become

a catalyst for querying the complexities of life-writing and its metafictional concerns in the writing of Henry James, with specific reference to “The Aspern Papers”, a selection of his annotated prefaces, and other tales such as “The Lesson of the Master”, “The Death of the Lion”, “The Real Right Thing” and “The Figure in the Carpet”. I explore in particular how the dynamic between the various textual personas (author, fictional biographer, subject, reader) brings into question authorial presence in the novella and how this dynamic affects literary truth.

In “The Aspern Papers” (1888), the fictitious American biographer or editor specialises in the work of Jeffrey Aspern. He decides to approach the fictitious poet’s erstwhile lover Juliana Bordereau, who is in possession of the poet’s papers, doing so by posing as a lodger and creating false visiting cards, “neatly engraved with a name that was not my own,” he says (57). He pretends to be desperate for a garden when he notices one is attached to the derelict palazzo where the papers he hopes to retrieve reside in Miss Juliana’s bureau. Here, the biographer is not only fictional but unnamed, and his attempt to secure the documents, whether for publication or to recreate a life based on indisputable fact, is unsuccessful. The very act of attempting to create a biography, albeit a new publication of new material, even in the absence of pure factual detail, becomes a work of art. Merle Williams adds that “Whether the editor-narrator wishes to appropriate a literary legacy, to ally himself with the high ideals of art for its sake, or to achieve a homoerotic affinity with Aspern, is left to the reader’s conjecture; any or all of these aspirations might pertain” (162).

The figure of the fictional biographer, by becoming the central character in the work himself, is intriguing and this lends itself to investigation. Barbara Currier Bell, interrogating the irony within *The Aspern Papers*, suggests that “the definitive characteristics of human life are the quest for knowledge and the quest for identity” (282). This reflects a theme in the work – the fictional biographer seems to be essentially concerned with acquiring knowledge and is concerned with establishing his

own identity to a greater or lesser extent in the novella. Through the latter, James explores human conduct and shows the biographer's self-deception as Bell suggests that his "Personal ambition is masked, in the narrator's mind, by a conviction that his object is to glorify Jeffrey Aspern" (286), and that "What he really seeks, unfortunately unaware, is a stronger manhood, a stronger self" (286).

This speaks to the homoeroticism to which Williams alludes, noted when the narrator stares longingly at Aspern's miniature portrait (136). Bell also points out how the editor-biographer believes he is being mocked by the dead Aspern. This clearly embodies James' "warning", Bell points out, that "the search for knowledge, as has been shown, focuses on self-deception" (286). Here the concept of truth becomes central to the ultimate goal of acquiring self-knowledge, which demands integrity and being honest with oneself. At least two kinds of truth elude the biographer: the truth of Aspern and the truth of himself. Yet the inability of achieving one kind of truth, biographical truth, is ironically valued more than achieving the other kind, truth of self. The reader is aware of this tragedy; the reader therefore resonates with the fictional biographer, whose business it is to seek out truth about life.

The quest for knowledge is linked to the quest for identity which is pivotal to the novella. The fictional biographer resonates with all human beings as he justifies his deceitful actions in his determination to secure the papers. James has his climactic attempted "robbery" scene lay bare the essence of the biographer's unscrupulousness, as he rifles Miss Juliana's bureau when she "hissed out passionately, furiously: 'Ah you publishing scoundrel!'" (127). However, there is no evidence to suggest he ever understands his own deception or indeed corruption. After Miss Tina proposes to him, though his "face showed the greatest embarrassment that was ever painted on a human countenance it was not set as a stone, it was full of compassion" (139). The complete ignorance of his understanding of his own insensitivity of his response to the situation underpins his arrogance and self-

deception as he is totally incapable of considering her feelings at this point and is only concerned with himself. The latter is emphasised by his remark: “It was a comfort to me a long time afterwards to consider that she could not have seen in me the smallest symptom of disrespect” (139). Here it would seem that James is cognisant of the truth that often human beings will not perceive the truth about themselves.

To ascertain James’ further possible effects of employing a fictional biographer, it is necessary to study how James attempts to control his own literary reputation in the selection of texts he refers to in the Preface to the New York Edition (1907). It is useful to establish how James’ revision process lends itself to the remaking of his œuvre, and how the use of the fictional biographer using the first-person is significant. Philip Horne, in *Henry James and Revision*, purports that in the New York Edition (and not in the 1888 text), “the narrator, a literary man, confesses near the end that he failed to notice the change in Miss Tina [or Tita as she is named in the NYE] because ‘I had been too full of stratagems and spoils to think of that…’” (qtd. In Horne 267). This revision, a reference to *The Merchant of Venice*, suggests that the narrator cannot be trusted (267). The unreliability of the narrator is linked to the contentions raised in the previous paragraph, namely that he is a “publishing scoundrel” (127) and knows that he is innately in the wrong and deserving of his subject’s posthumous mockery. This is significant because the biographical form demands elements of truth to prevail to satisfy the reader’s desire to know. The duplicity and falsity attributed to the biographer regarding his “stratagems and spoils” is made clear from the beginning of the tale and brings into question the morals and ethics associated with the writing of biography. Yet we need to bear in mind, as Barbara Currier Bell states, that “James uses irony only as an artistic means for highlighting an unqualified moral value: the responsibility of being human” (282). The narrator is human first and biographer second. His self-deception (the result of his intrinsic character, and not as his role as a biographer) is the cause of the hurt he brings upon Miss Tina.

The incorporation of a fictional biographer may be deliberately linked to James' concern that a writer ought to be evaluated by his work and not by an account of his life's story. In his short story, "The Real Right Thing", James seems to resist the notion of having any kind of biographer, dramatizing this position in the narrative. The distinguished author Ashton Doyne's ghostly return foils the attempts by his erstwhile journalist friend Mr George Withermore to write the biography his wife has commissioned him to write. Both Mrs Doyne and George become aware of the presence of the disapproving spirit of Ashton, causing them both anxiety, which has Mrs Doyne state that she desires to do what the right thing, the titular phrase. Finally, they both agree to give up the writing of the biography.

Clare Connors analyses this story in an original way, using "biographical criticism", "authorial intention" and "unconscious meaning" to look into the "deeper meaning of the story" (3), which directly relates to the fictional biographer in *The Aspern Papers* as well as to "The Real Right Thing". I agree with Connors' point that James' own homosexuality may be perceived in his writing – there is a suggestion that Withermore and Doyne had an intimate relationship. Doyne's ghost appears to prevent his "private life" being invaded and his reputation being put at stake in a biography that would be exposed in the "public" space. Of course, Withermore's role as fictional biographer is deliberately inserted to reflect the dangers of certain types of biographies being permitted to enter the public domain.

Another aspect of James' sexuality, especially as it is potentially reflected in "The Aspern Papers", is perhaps observed in his relationship with Fenimore Woolson, a woman. It is a relationship that bears comparisons with his fictional biographer's living with women in a derelict Venetian palazzo, just as James lived with Fenimore Woolson in the Villa Brichieri-Colombi on a separate floor, near Florence where he wrote "The Aspern Papers". Tending towards an explanation of Woolson's suicide in 1894, Michael Gorra suggests that "Woolson saw herself as forever cut off from the life she

craved, a woman who couldn't have the things she wanted and perhaps among them Henry James himself" (xxii). Interestingly, because the fictional biographer-editor reacts so emotionally after Tita's proposal which would secure him the Aspern papers, he orders his gondolier, "in a tone that made him stare, [to go] 'Anywhere, anywhere; out into the lagoon!'" (140). He remarks: "He rowed me away and I sat prostrate, groaning softly to myself, with my hat pulled over my face" (140). Philip Horne points out in his book, *Henry James and Revision*, that in the NYE (sent to Scribners in February 1908, about fourteen years after Fenimore Woolson's suicide) the wording changes slightly: "He rowed me away and I sat there prostrate, groaning softly to myself, my hat pulled over my brow" (NYE xii. 135-6). Horne shows how this relates to *Macbeth* and Shakespeare's wisdom in suggesting "the relief of grief that can be found in telling it" (265). The question is whether the extreme emotional experience he displays at this point relates to the possible loss of Miss Bordereau's "crumpled scraps" (James 141) or indeed the possible union with the "angelic", "beatified", "younger" Miss Tina (James 144), which possibly causes the "intolerable" feeling of loss or confusion. It is a moment of emotional ambiguity, reflecting the same kind of ambiguity or ambivalence one might experience when attempting to read James into his work.

In "The Aspern Papers", as mentioned in the introduction, James' burning of his private correspondence at Lamb House displays a similar concern for authorial privacy. There is factual overlap between text and author here, but these titbits of information are not enough to suggest that there is complete parity between the two. The similarities between them, as Connors' work suggests, is determined by having to read between the lines of both the author's life and the texts he created, and even then it takes an act of creative reading to suggest that this or that character seems to be James, or that this or that scenario mirrors his real biography.

J.P. Telotte defends James' position by stating that, "In 'The Real Right Thing' it is Ashton's ghost and the biography that represent these two forms of reality. What is

the ‘Real Right Thing’? Is it the mysterious apparition or is it the biography?” (5). The ghost represents the anti-biography dialectic, and the biography itself is what requires abandonment because the work must not be evaluated on the author’s biographical details, according to James. Possibly the real reason for this conscious divulging of authorial biographical detail is what Connors suggests, namely that “James unconsciously expressed that he did not want his reputation to be destroyed” through scandals, his homosexuality (4).

In “The Aspern Papers”, the unnamed fictional biographer does not seem to be concerned about Jeffrey Aspern’s poetry – rather, he is interested in his life. James seems intent on characterising the narrator’s motives as misdirected and base. James’ strategy is clearly a construct to expose “a publishing scoundrel” and to raise pertinent questions with regard to biography writing where the fictional biographer is indeed a catalyst with regard to the questions raised, but paradoxically is a real (yet fictional) character, fully involved with those close to his subject in the narrative.

When Mrs Prest pretends to make light of Jeffrey Aspern’s genius, the fictional biographer says, “I took no pains to defend him. One doesn’t defend one’s god: one’s god is in himself a defence” (52). Through this fictional biographer, Henry James is questioning whether the narrator wants “a bundle of Jeffrey Aspern’s letters” (51) for the right reasons – is his editor quest actually useful in terms of the literary production or is he simply pursuing it for the sake of interest in salacious detail? In the case of the latter, Julia’s accusation of his being a “publishing scoundrel” (127) would be justified. James’ critique of the biographer extends to the reader and reading culture within the publishing industry, intent on positioning their authors as celebrities. If truth is at all a consideration in this milieu, then it is the truth of only the biographical subject, namely Aspern; the subject’s history as it pertains to the work, the poetry he produced is of no importance. (This is unfortunately ironic, as one would assume it is precisely his work that would have afforded him this godly status to begin with.)

James' critique, though, is not a mere dismissal of biography. The details of the plot suggest a more complex approach. The reader has to negotiate the complicated relationship between the first-person narrator and his real and deceitful wooing of Miss Tina. At one stage he seems attracted to her – he states he is kind to her "because [he] really liked her" (140), but then is appalled at her proposal of marriage, stating, "I could not pay the price. I could not accept. I could not for a bundle of papers, marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman" (141). And yet, on his return to her he says,

> She stood in the middle of the room with a face of mildness bent upon me, and her look of forgiveness, of absolution made her angelic. It beautified her; she was younger; she was not a ridiculous old woman… It seemed I was ready to pay the price. (144)

But the moment she tells him she destroyed the papers, "burnt them last night one by one", the biographer states that "the transfiguration was over and she had changed back to a plain, dingy, elderly person" (144-45). And all the fictional biographer is finally left with is the miniature portrait of Jeffrey Aspern that hangs above his writing table, and he admits that "When I look at it my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable" (145).

James uses the fictional biographer to convey these complicated transitions whereby Miss Tina's value to him seems to be predicted upon how close she will bring him to acquiring the Aspern papers. James does not simplistically satirise the rapacious, unscrupulous tendencies of biographers here, but rather uses the narrator to entice the reader's curiosity to wonder whether he will in fact procure the papers or not, but without covertly presenting judgement. The construct itself forces the reader to engage with far more complicated issues, questioning what the true intention of the biographer is – either pursuit of pure academic information or biographical details to

sensationalise the life of the subject for publishing expediency, where the fictional biographer is used as part of the process of granting the author (the biographical subject) public recognition. Ultimately, as Anna Salne Brylowski maintains, ironically "there is no sure reaching the truth of the past through documents. The faded spirit of the past is not in papers but ultimately in the imaginative powers of the re-creator of that spirit" (239). Thus, James, through the fictional biographer, shows the inadequacies of the biographer's search for mere facts which are essentially lifeless and require creative re-working of cold, dead facts to enliven the spirit of its subject.

The complexity of biographical writing is clear from the Preface to the New York Edition, where James provides details to corroborate the idea that "The Aspern Papers" is a deliberate construct; in other words, it is a story with a metafictional purpose, or as James stated himself, an "experiment" (324). The fictional biographer is the instigator of the investigation of biography writing, a genre that assumes to shape a certain kind of reader response to the text. Yet in the case of "The Aspern Papers", the response James wishes to elicit from the reader is an understanding of the duplicity of the role of the fictional biographer in the text as an exposer of the questionable ulterior motives of the "publishing scoundrel" (127).

James states in the New York Edition's Preface that "the historian, essentially, wants more documents than he can really use; the dramatist only wants more liberties than he can really take" (320-321). This acquisitiveness describes James' fictional biographer. James goes on to state categorically with regard to the writing of *The Aspern Papers* that "it was 'amusing', in any case, always to try experiments; and the experiment for the right *transposition* of my Juliana would be to fit her out with an immortalizing poet as transposed as herself" (324). "Transposition" refers to the transferring of old stories to a contemporary milieu, and James admits to experimenting with transposition in this novella in the introduction to *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales* (xxiii). By transposing his subject, Juliana, from the past Claire

Clairmont, erstwhile lover seemingly of the immortalised poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, James transposes an old story to a contemporary milieu. To the scholarly reader, the relevant connections will be made and the metafictional concerns of James' writing will be undeniable, and take on different metafictional guises which are pertinent to the role of the figure of the fictional biographer he employs in his writing. Thus, Henry James becomes that "re-creator" of that "spirit of the past" constantly reflecting precisely on the process of his writing as well as enticing the reader with all the elements of the prerequisites for an original story. James' reliance on Shelley and Clairmont's relationship is sustained for the sake of artistic creation. He relies on the historical truth of their lives to create an entirely new narrative. Unlike the biographer of "The Aspern Papers", James leaves his biographical subjects to rest.

Just as "The Real Right Thing" is a fictional story where James resists the notion of having any kind of biographer, so too does he resist the real by reimagining his past in his own (pseudo)autobiography, "A Small Boy and Others". This autobiography was written when James was in his 70s, and in it he reflects (in memoir style) upon his past, seemingly honestly relating his growing up as a young boy and his "Napoleonic dreams of glory as an artist" (qtd. in Poirier 2). James' interest in what it means to be an artist and what it means to create as an artist is clear in his *Stories of Writers and Artists.* F.O. Matthiessen suggests in the introduction to *Stories of Writers and Artists* that "the value of James' figure may be judged, as he insisted, only if it is sought out through his work as a whole. Only thus may be decided whether his scruples and renunciations are a sterile emptiness, or the guides to a peculiarly poignant suffering and inner triumph" (17). Such ambivalence serves only to conceal the artist further – Matthiessen shows that we are to rely only on James' fiction to determine the shape of the man who produced these works. And works such as *Reading Autobiography* by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson establish whether or not the use of the fictional biographer has as its motive the telling of some truth about the author's personhood. Though Matthiessen and Smith and Watson may be right, determining complete truth

about the author through the fictional biographer may be a stretch. As my reading of "The Aspern Papers" has, in part, demonstrated, we acquire some sense of some of James through the text, identifying, most tellingly, his preference to foreground the text over the artist, but we never have a sense of the man in his entirety.

According to James in *Stories of Writers and Artists*, the contentions that he presents in "The Lesson of the Master", "The Real Right Thing", "The Death of the Lion" and "The Figure in the Carpet" were designed as a plea for mature criticism ("Introduction" 6). His ideal readers were those who read skilfully and passionately, the kinds of readers attuned to the fact that his texts may be read in multiple ways, each way justifiable on with interpretations anchored in the text itself.

In "The Lesson of the Master", James' metaphor is clear regarding the theme of this novella, which is concerned with how the social life of the artist may influence creative output negatively. Paul Overt is the aspiring author who is influenced by the "Master". The omniscient third-person narrator states about the "Master", Henry St George, the following:

> For the young aspirant he had remained a high literary figure, in spite of the lower range of production to which he had fallen after his three first great successes, the comparative absence of quality in his later work. There had been moments when Paul Overt almost shed tears for this. ("The Lesson of the Master" 96)

The third-person narrator makes the reader aware of the aspiring writer's cognisance of the dwindling of creative output of the "Master" as a result of his "social life". In this case, "social life" takes the form of the wife of Henry St George, Mrs St George, "who might have been the wife of a gentleman who 'kept' books rather than wrote them" (99). The lesson Paul Overt learns from the Master writer is painful. Henry St George,

after his wife's death, marries the beautiful Miss Fancourt on whom Overt had designs. St George insists part of the reason he did it was "to save him" and he further states, "'I shall be the making of you'" and "'for the rest of my life I shall only read *you*'" (150). The narrator concludes the novella by stating that "the Master was essentially right, and that nature had dedicated him to intellectual, not to personal, passion" (151). "The Aspern Papers" may be read in a similar way. The narrator attempts to acquire both a "social life" and the papers he needs for his (pseudo)intellectual pursuit. But by the end of the text, the person upon whom he relies to provide him with a "social life", Miss Tina, burns Aspern's papers. One's personal and professional lives, particularly lives of writers, James suggests, cannot cohere. The biographer or professional editor sloses Miss Tina, loses Venice, and his biographical project.

In "The Death of the Lion", the author uses the fictional biographer as a metafictional device to distance himself from his work in order to reflect on it and relate to it so that he would perhaps have a measure of control over how the work will be received with respect to the relationship between biography and criticism. In this story, James ironically criticises the lionisation of writers – the fictional biographer tells the snobby journalist, Mr Morrow (who seeks information about the author Neil Paraday simply because he was reviewed in *The Empire*) that "the artist's life's his work, and this is the place to observe him. What he has to tell us he tells us with this perfection. My dear sir, the best interviewer's the best reader" (qtd. in *Stories of Writers and Artists* 222). All there is to know about a famous author lies in his work. But Mr Morrow later publishes an article about Neil Paraday's house in *The Tatler*, and not a word about his actual writing appears in the publication. The narrator is appalled. James himself alludes to what Philip Horne defines as perfect fiction:

> The project of making a perfect work of fiction, that is one whose form is finished but whose meanings are satisfyingly in motion, requires for James fidelity to a truth about the relation of points of view, involves an

> imaginative grasp of the articulations of a drama in such a way that the conditions of life still inhere, to the extent that values circulate and no single point of view gets an automatic passage to authority. This is one of the formal truths taught by the medium (which conventionally didactic works and critics ignore at their peril). (288)

James explores the art of writing through fiction so that the reader, rather than being presented with an academic paper on the theory of the art of writing, is engaged with the plotline and subject of a fictional representation of the metafictional concerns. Thus, rather than a cold academic approach that risks closing off meaning, risks being read as the definitive treatise on this or that subject, James instead presents narratives that are, by comparison, more open to meaning and meaning-making. The reader is enticed to engage with plots through the stimulation of curiosity, where the complex issues James presents in his stories, whether parables or problems, draw the reader in and the quests or foibles of the fictional biographer become the reader's own.

The unnamed narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet" assumes he has commendably reviewed a novel by the famous author, Hugh Vereker, but then overhears Vereker at a dinner party and states, "I strained my ear for his reply [and] I heard him, to my stupefaction, call back gaily, his mouth full of bread: 'Oh it's all right – the usual twaddle!'" (284). He feels "ruffled" (284) by these words. On bumping into Vereker afterwards, Vereker sets out to console him by suggesting that nobody had been able to identify the deeper secret in his work that the narrator refers to as "something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet" (293). The narrator purports the author's response to be "the very string" that "[his] pearls are strung on" (293). This launches the narrator's search for the essence of the author's metaphor.

The complexity of the plot of the latter novella was foreshadowed by a similar idea in "The Aspern Papers" which of course was written earlier at the end of nineteenth

century. This narrator's quest at all costs to unravel the secret is fraught with disaster. The friend of the narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet", and rival, George Corvick, writes from India that he has solved the mystery but refuses to say what it is, and says that he will write up his discovery in an article. But while on his honeymoon, Corvick is killed in a car accident and the little he wrote reveals nothing about the "figure in the carpet". In the introduction to *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales*, Michael Gorra refers to James' notes for "The Figure in the Carpet" and states that

> The story's title has become a catchphrase that for better or probably worse now defines the act of criticism, of tracing the patterns in a given artist's work; patterns that the story suggests are hiding in plain sight. James' plans for this cryptic tale are unusually detailed and predicated on his refusal to reveal the nature of that figure. (xix)

Gorra further states that "James' own work might possess a hidden pattern of its own" (xix). Interestingly, he implies that the missing interpretative code in the story that remains forever unrevealed is a deliberate construct. He writes that the Bulgarian-French critic and historian, Tzevetan Todorov, has suggested that the lacunae are themselves the figure in James' own carpet, that his stories are "always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause" (qtd. in Gorra 12). Each story depends on the "unspoken" and the "meanings that cluster around it are what give the tale its extraordinary poignancy, and its power" (xxiii).

Various academics like Daniel K. Hannah have reflected on how readers seek "a revelation of the author behind the books, a key to the texts" (70). Yet part of what remains hidden or obscured in James' work is James himself, while he uses the fictional biographer as a device to meet this end. Absolute truth is at stake too, to an extent; if the secret or the hidden is what foregrounds the text, then a fair degree of work and interpretation is needed to reveal (or tend towards revealing) what lies

behind the obscure. If James refuses to give it to us directly, then our only way to understand what is hidden is to outline its shape. Its contents remain for James knowledge and his knowledge alone. In the case of James, this obfuscation may be necessary if his aim is to protect himself from that which may affect his public image. James is aware of his publicity, his celebrity. According to Midori Machida, in "Re-reading Henry James's 'Death of the Lion'",

> The adoption of the first-person narrative and implication of the narrator indicates James' awareness of his own inextricability from the commercial practices of the contemporary literary culture. It is through this reflexive strategy of the tale that James was able to criticize the contemporary cultural scene with cogency and deeper understanding. (17)

The distance James places between himself and his texts allows for a greater sense of reflection, not only on himself (potentially), but also on the industry in which he participates. This is the purpose behind the fictional biographer, though such a figure fulfils other functions in James' work.

David Lodge, in *Author Author*, speaks of James' concern with a "model [for] the relationship between fictional biographer and subject" (82). James figures the fictional biographer differently in different texts, where the most stark mark of difference may be identified in how James allows or prevents the biographer from speaking, or from narrating the story. There exists much theoretical analysis with regard to the use of the first-person narrator. The fictional biographer is often unnamed in James' novellas. For example, he deliberately does not name the protagonist in "The Aspern Papers" to reinforce a sense of doubt in the reader, as it positions the reader negatively towards him from the outset – a name would endear him to us. The choice of first- or third-

person narration in James' work, generally, speaks toward what kind of information the author is willing to give his readers and characters, as Brylowski shows:

> The first-person narrator of the story becomes the vehicle for the form and content of the work, but he is, nevertheless, subtly manipulated by the implied author. This unobtrusive presence of the author enables the reader to see beyond what the speaker sees. Thus, an ironic tension is at work…which the reader is invited to share. (219)

Though the author wields some influence in the novel (James' work, for Brylowski, is not quite as writerly in the way Barthes has defined the term) the reader still plays an important role in the interpretation of the text. Also, the dissemination of truth (information, revelation, discovery) is what seems to determine James' choice of using a first- or third-person narrator. In "The Aspern Papers", Brylowski suggests that the truth towards which the reader is moving is literary truth, and James is most likely expecting "the reader's business" to become "an imaginary journey with the speaker into his experience for the understanding of [literary truth], if not necessarily for a complete agreement with it" (240). Not all players are privy to this literary truth, though James provides enough information to the reader to discover it. The narrator, and in the case of "The Aspern Papers" also the biographer, is not always afforded this information.

According to Brylowski, the narrator-biographer in "The Aspern Papers"

> reveals his story in two narrative voices. The reader sees him now as a man of professional dedication to the arts, especially Aspern's poetry, now as a man practising hypocrisy and duplicity in the name of his dedication … to secure Aspern's letters from his one-time mistress Juliana Bourdereau with the help of her niece Tina. (215)

Brylowski suggests the novella is a kind of dramatic monologue (though the narrator adopts different voices throughout), where the reader's perspective "is thus a limited one and is likely to involve distortions of the physical and moral truths as objectively seen" (217). This makes the fictional biographer both omnipotent – as he draws on the reader's curiosity as to whether he will secure the papers in the end – and absurdly lacking in control as he does not achieve his goal in the end. He is thus the combination of villain and aesthete in his character. Brylowski suggests that, in spite of being ambiguous,

> The full man who hereby emerges is capable of both aesthetic sensitivity and an egotistic conviction that any means he may choose in reaching his goal would justify his ends. The reader is charmed into readiness to partake in the narrator's strange quest in which, as the man himself admits, hypocrisy and duplicity will be the chosen means. (222)

Brylowski suggests there is an "implied author" who subtly manipulates the first-person narrator (219). This, as is suggested, enables "the reader to see beyond what the speaker sees" (219). The role of the fictional biographer then is clearly a modernist construct used as a vehicle for the author to examine the actual metafictional concerns raised in the fiction. We become aware of the artifice of the narrative (and so become aware of James' presence) in the moments in which we realise we know more than the narrator, more than the figure whose story this is.

One may witness in James' works, and in "The Aspern Papers" specifically, the beginnings of what we understand as modernism. This is discernible in the text's setting, Venice, and especially in James' attitudes towards the city. Michael Gorra states that, "In an essay, James had already described the city as the most beautiful of tombs" (33). He continues: "Venice had lived on after its own end, a crypt in which

all kinds of things might be buried, and it now seemed a place for secrets" (xxiii). James' appreciation of the city seems to lie in its anachronism; it is a place whose secrets, that which is buried, describe how its time is out of joint. The secrecy that defines Venice, for James, is the same secrecy that drives the narrator of "The Aspern Papers". We notice this from the text's opening line: "I had taken Mrs Prest into my confidence" (50). The narrator's first words, amplified by the first-person narrative, mark the text's insularity. We are stuck in the narrator's head, the head of a schemer, but also, importantly, the head of a writer. James' modernist concerns in the text are expressed not only in the setting and the narrative voice, but in the text's subject matter, too. It is a story about writing and storytelling, though the crux of the conclusion to which we arrive is that, through the destruction of Aspern's papers, there can never be a story. It is perhaps this point that speaks most readily to James' modernism; in typical modernist fashion, James figures his narrative on absence: we are set in a time that is out of time; we rely on a narrator who functions on secrecy; and we follow the development of a story (the details of Aspern's life) that can finally never be told.

On the philosophical plane, Roland Barthes resonates with James in key respects. Just as Barthes advocates in his own writings, James' work seems to foreground the importance of the reader; the author is secondary in James' work (and altogether dead for Barthes). The reader becomes conscious of the fact that not one line of Jeffrey Aspern's poetry is tabulated in "The Aspern Papers" and that the unnamed fictional biographer-editor is really only interested in what in Aspern's papers might throw some light on his personal life rather than on the brilliance of his poetic output. The reader is aware of more than the narrator believes he lets on.

Caitríona Ní Dhúill, in *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography*, writes of how the reader is often the figure most valued in the production of a biography; it is the figure to which the writing of a biography is directed (as opposed to the subject of the biography). Ní Dhúill writes that the assumption regarding the mode of biography is

that it is about “a life that is singular at one level only: at the level of the body-become-corpse. At the end of it all, there is only one body, and that an absent one” (13). In “The Aspern Papers” we have the absent Aspern, but in anonymising his biographer, James “kills” Aspern’s biographer, too. We are left with the reader in the subject-biographer-reader dynamic. And it is the reader, according to Ní Dhúill (speaking of biographies more generally), who initiates and completes the biographical narrative:

> [T]he basic constellation of biography is triangulated from the outset, even before its first words have reached the page. What we read in biography is not just the story of a person: it is, in Hermione Lee’s deceptively simple and suggestive phrase, the story of a person told by someone else. Often criticised for its apparent commitment to the illusion of the individual subject…, biography is in fact located in the intersubjective space that it opens up between the subject, biographer, and reader, a space analogous to the interfacial relation a portrait creates between portraitist, sitter, and viewer. [The face of biography] is in fact many faces; its facets, like those of a diamond, never squarely opposite, always oblique. The coordinates of the discursive field it constitutes stretch between absent subject (the person whom the biography is ‘about’), biographical researcher (the biographer when she is still a reader-detective, before she begins to write), protagonist of narrative (the third-person construct propelled (back) into being by the text), author-narrator (the biographer as she writes), and reader (intended, imagined, and actual). The reader may stand as the last element in this chain; but in some ways she has also initiated it, calling the subject forth out of oblivion in a circular motion reminiscent of M. C. Escher’s two hands that draw each other. The biographer writes of the subject, but writes for the reader. Escher’s hands, each drawing the other, dramatise the interface between the living body and its

> representation, capturing a sort of feedback loop between *bios* and *graphein*, life and writing, a chiastic relationship between life-writing and the writing of lives. (13-14)

Meaning and information begin and ende with the reader for Ní Dhúill, unlike Foucault would have it, where Foucault (speaking not of biography but of writing more generally) argues that writing begins with the writer who is responding to other writers, who have in turn responded to other writers. Ní Dhúill presents a more reader-centric understanding of this flow of information, where the reader calls out to know (the biographical subject) – it is for the writer to respond to this call.

The importance of the reader is made most literal in "The Death of the Lion". Here, the protagonist, the fictional biographer-journalist criticises another journalist, insisting that "The best interviewer's the best reader" (222), intimating that the author's private life is not as important as the work is.

Michael Foucault argues that the author maintains his authority if he can influence others and if they have the power to provide rules for other texts, if the author is able to exert influence on the authors that come after her, is able to inspire them to write in response. Foucault uses the term "'author function' – a concept that replaces the idea of the author as a person" (Edwards n.p.). According to Foucault,

> It is easy to see that in the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book – one can be the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find their place. (217)

Though Foucault shows how the author is important in this narrative dynamic, he importantly does not negate the importance of the reader. James shows that, in

consuming a story, it is the author who is secondary to the reader, an unexpected position if we are also to consider that this comes from an author who, in his more sincere autobiographical writing, speaks of his desire for authorial greatness. James' texts, then, are more writerly as Barthes describes such texts – texts that are written in a way that requires a reader to create (or write) meaning into the text, a text that requires a reader to make meaning of the text, as opposed to a text whose meaning is made apparent, making no space for the reader to intervene, explore, and play. And to write in such a writerly fashion, especially as it is reflected in James' style, was greatly influential for many authors who followed the icon. (In this regard, he wrote in a way that satisfied the definition of an author as Foucault conceptualised it.)

Henry James, as a precursor to modernism, influenced other canonical authors such as Virginia Woolf, who read James' novels and wrote on them, too. James' stream of consciousness technique, adapted from the work of his brother, William James, who used it in psychology to gain clearer insight into the unconscious, was greatly influential for the modernists who would write a few years after James. It is the mind, then which is paramount in James, and to which he focused his authorial attention, attempting to determine how one's exteriority (politics, the city, celebrity, marriage, and so forth) affected one's interiority.

James' various obfuscations (of plot, character, self) ultimately serve the acquisition of truth. James is not an author who worships fidelity. This is a quality of all his works, but, importantly here, in those works that make use of the biographer. Philippe Lejeune's "The Autobiographical Contract" lists the kinds of qualities to which an (auto)biography is expected to adhere, yet even in this essay, Lejeune (quoting Andre Gide: "It is about time I finally told the truth. But can only do it in a work of fiction" (218)) recognises that truth, especially truth of oneself, must be imparted by any means necessary, even if through lies. James' texts speak to the same disposition. There is truth in lies and lies in truth, James seems to suggest. Adhering doggedly to truth

would close the text in, limit the various truths readers could acquire. And though we may never be certain about the truth of Henry James as author, lover, or citizen, there is nevertheless pleasure in working through the lies of his fiction that tend towards forming some semblance of the man.

Chapter 3: J.M. Coetzee

J.M. Coetzee's fictional autobiographical writing demands the querying of the role of the fictional biographer figure. This is the case particularly in the novel *Summertime* (2009), which concludes his biographical trilogy (preceded by *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2003)). *Summertime* is a clever pseudo-autobiography exploring the personal aspects of biography using the figure of the fictional biographer, Mr Vincent, writing the life of the deceased writer, John Coetzee. He conducts his research through a series of interviews with interviewees who give their interpretations of the subject. The reader is provided with transcripts of each interview.

The interviewees reveal their essentially negative analyses of John Coetzee to Mr Vincent by showing blatant contempt for John's coldness, passivity, detachment, and his lack of presence. These specific aspects of the subject's character need to be explored as they are helpful in understanding the motivations behind the construction of the fictional biographer. Broadly, the biographer is set up to pose specific questions to elicit responses that are in keeping with the negative public persona of the genuine author J.M. Coetzee. A careful explication of the text is necessary to ascertain why the author of *Summertime* would go to such lengths to present a deprecating image of himself, even though reviewers such as Nicholas Shakespeare in *The Telegraph* insist that *Summertime* is simply "a virtuoso exploration of the pitfalls and limits of biography" (1).

Paulina Grzeda suggests in her article, "The Ethico-Politics of Autobiographical Writings: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood, Youth* and *Summertime*", that "confessional writing has been burgeoning in South Africa over the past two decades", where the post-millennial trend of such writing suggest that authors aim to "turn from the public sphere towards the private one, to reclaim space for auto-critique, self-questioning and expression of personal grief" (77).

She goes on to say that Coetzee's works

> maintain the principles of "committed" writing, working largely at the level of personal ethico-political responsibility of resistance against any spiritually oppressive systems. It is through Coetzee's formal experimentation, through the author's radical disruption of the discourses of the autobiographical genre, what Jane Poynter terms "acts of genre", rather than through his works' substance, that Coetzee manages to counteract established discourses and in doing so, restores the richness of South African intellectual life, which was severely regulated and stifled under apartheid. (77)

Coetzee overtly sublimates the personal into the public space for the sake of literary experiment. The novel opens with the author's Notebooks 1972-1975, written in the third person, where he comments on a newspaper report of political violence in Botswana and states:

> So they come out, week after week, these tales from the borderlands, murders followed by bland denials. He reads the reports and feels soiled. So this is what he has come back to! Yet where in the world can one hide where one will not feel soiled? Would he feel any cleaner in the snows of Sweden, reading at a distance about his people and their latest pranks? How to escape the filth: not a new question. An old rat-question. That will not let go, that leaves its nasty, suppurating wound. Agenbite of inwit. (*Summertime* 4)

This quotation from the opening pages of the novel immediately sets the tone for the pseudo-autobiography and the implications of the personal in the public domain. The

third-person narration (employed even though J.M. Coetzee is writing of some version of himself) creates authorial distance, and yet there are numerous aspects in these few lines that seem to reflect the confessional writing element suggested in Grzeda's article. The third-person speaker in the above is clearly affected by the recurring political violence associated with his motherland, as he feels "soiled", and the "wound" left behind is highlighted by the phrase "agenbite of inwit" (4), (a remorse of conscience). It is also a phrase repurposed from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which the phrase appears several times with Joyce's idiosyncratic spelling in the chapters Telemachus, Wandering Rocks and Circe. This, Coetzee wants us to know, is a text, with its quintessentially modernist inflections, that inspires his own work. Joyce's use of the phrase is tethered to the guilt he carried for not fulfilling his dying mother's wish to pray at her bedside, a consequence perhaps of his own veneration of his detached artistic persona (according to Joyce's biographer, Richard Ellmann). In Coetzee's use, Neuman suggests it is a "particular archaism for the remorse of conscience [and] is an unattributed quotation from Joyce's *Ulysses*", where

> John Coetzee draws on Stephen Dedalus's lament to voice the pricks of his own conscience regarding his abject response to the injustices of life in apartheid-era South Africa, [and] he activates a rich intertextual and historical link between Irish and South African political culture. (129)

Also, Coetzee's usage may suggest his own artistic detachment from his motherland and its politics, which he reduces to "pranks". This detachment seems to be reinforced by his casual remark to his father: "'I see the Defence Force is up to its old tricks again.'" The narrator continues, "But his father is too wary to rise to the bait. When his father picks up the newspaper, he takes care to skip straight to the sports pages, missing out the politics – the politics and the killings" (4). The fact that Coetzee even mentions this refusal of his father to engage with the topic, coupled with the inclusion

of the emotive word “killings”, clearly indicates the speaker’s concern and admonition towards the violence associated with the politics of the day.

In the Notebooks, Coetzee sets up the character of John Coetzee as one of reluctant detachment: he is implicated in the story of his family, his nation, and, of course, implicated in the story of his own life, but nevertheless creates distance between himself and these matters. The only certainly we have of Coetzee’s persona is his desire to conceal himself in the subject of this fictional biography.

Other fragmented notes appear in which the voice of the author sounds authentic. These sections may be construed as reality rather than invention. This is corroborated in J.C. Kannemeyer’s biography, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*. Kannemeyer writes:

> His novel, *Summertime*, set in the 1970s, opens with reference to a report that, according to the dating, appeared on the front page of the *Sunday Times* on 21 August 1972. In Francistown, the capital of Botswana, a motor car, a white American model, in the middle of the night stopped at a house in a residential area. Men masking their faces with balaclavas jumped out, kicked in the front door, started shooting, set the house on fire, and drove off. (210)

The above report is largely the same as that which appears on the opening page of the novel. An endnote in Kannemeyer tells a different story:

> Since 21 August 1972 fell on a Monday, 20 August is probably intended here. In that issue, though, there in [sic] no report on an attack in Francistown, and also not in other issues of the *Sunday Times* in the same month. (641)

Coetzee unsettles our reliance on the kinds of text that we hold up as indisputable: newspaper reports. As they are placed in a novel, Coetzee reminds us that anything is possible within the covers of *Summertime*, any bit of history (personal or political) can be fabricated. The context Coetzee describes gives one only the shape of truth – we know more about what it felt like at the time rather than what it was in documented reality. Yet we also read this fabricated political history alongside what we know to be true without doubt, that a South African man called Coetzee wrote the novels mentioned in the book and taught at a South African university, and so forth. This implies that the truth of the context of one's life need not cohere with the truth of one's interiority. The truth of one's context and one's life can be appreciated separately; their truths need not inform each other.

Structurally, the interviews occur directly after these factual note fragments, the first of the interviewees being Julia, interviewed by Mr Vincent, to whom we are also introduced. In these sections, the first-person narrative is used, and the style is adapted to engage the reader and to create authorial distance – all seemingly designed to be Hyperborean, in the Nietzschean sense, to raise the real Coetzee "above the crowd".

The fictional biographer seems to be a device in the novel conceived – consciously or subconsciously – to question the art of life-writing. Mr Vincent interviews Julia, posing his questions in an italicised, formal style. Through the use of the first-person narrative, he is given the omniscience and omnipotence to comment on his subject's writing and character. Through the fictional biographer, Coetzee, the real author of the novel, is ostensibly making himself visible through the information given to Mr Vincent by those personally connected to John Coetzee. Yet it is this same device, interviews from those connected to him, that obscures the author. This is evident from the first interview, Julia's, whose vivid recollections begin to blur Coetzee, the mysterious authorial figure.

Mr Vincent questions Julia in a formal register, calling her Dr Frankl, and asks her if she had met John's father and whether she had seen the son in the father. Her answers possibly echo the public persona of the real author, and this is recognisable to the reader who is familiar with J.M. Coetzee. Vincent demands an answer that demonstrates his role as the fictional biographer, which is to extract the response that Coetzee assumes his readers would expect: "they were both loners. Socially inept. Repressed, in the wider sense of the word" (20). This answer immediately engages the reader. Her next query shifts the focus away from the personal to the metafictional element of the novel. She asks him "about those notebook entries: the italicized passages at the end of them – *to be expanded on* and so forth. Who wrote those? Did you?" (20). It is interesting that the fictional biographer responds with: "Coetzee wrote them himself. They are memos to himself, written in 1999 or 2000, when he was thinking of adapting those particular entries for a book" (20). I agree with Kannemeyer, who writes

> What at first would seem to be mere notes from a diary, then, are transformed by later additions into pointers towards later expansion by the dead writer, and thus a rough copy, a text-in-the-making betraying a certain provisionality and incompleteness. The incompleteness is deceptive, because what the reader gets – paradoxically – is a complete text of which the apparent provisionality is part of the *whole.* (605)

The role of Vincent is directly commensurate with the metafictional dialectic that the complexity of the novel implies: Mr Vincent is here to both reveal and obscure his subject. Coetzee, the author of S*ummertime*, seems to be inextricably bound up in his fictional biographer, and he might deliberately disappear as he explores – or rather problematises – the intricacies of life-writing.

Julia reveals much about her own reactions to her liaison with John during the interviews with Vincent and admits to making up their dialogue, explaining that "what I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true in spirit, be assured of that" (32). When she notes that John was "not a great talker, as you must know", Mr Vincent admits to never having met his subject "in the flesh" (34). He goes on to justify this by saying that it freed him from any obligation towards him and that it would leave him "free to write what I wished" (35). The paradox here is that the fictional biographer gives the author the freedom to write as he wished through him, though Mr Vincent is not as "free to write" as he believes (or as J.M. Coetzee, the author of *Summertime*, makes him believe he is). This raises the question of the reason for biographical research, and whether it may well be conducted for the salacious detail that might hold a morbid fascination for the popular reading public. Julia states that she almost refused to speak to him in case he was just some "busybody" "hoping to get some dirt on him" (35).

The biographer's questions seem to highlight the concerns of any writer who undertakes the task of combining fact and fiction. Julia's concern is that the subject of this biography was clearly in love with her, but she feels that because she "never quite flowered in him, [the romance] never came to life" (36), meaning that she did not appear as a character in any of the subject's books. Ironically, she is in the very novel that contains the interviews with Mr Vincent, *Summertime*. Her further analysis of John is that he lacks passion and is autistic, yet she maintains that, in spite of having had a "reputation for being dour… John Coetzee was actually quite funny. A figure of comedy. Dour comedy. Which in an obscure way, he knew, even accepted" (63). This analysis suggests a sharp auto-critique on the part of the author, and it is enhanced by the astute intervention of the fictional biographer who extracts this information from Julia, culminating with her ultimate observation that he was "the man who mistook his mistress for a violin" (83), adapting the title of Oliver Sacks' *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, an analysis of intellectual impairment; Julia ultimately suggests that "he

was not human, not fully human" (83). It may be read that this is J.M. Coetzee's analysis of himself. But another of Coetzee's works, in *Doubling the Point*, puts this claim under suspicion: "the self cannot tell a truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception" (Coetzee 291). Paula Grzeda, in light of this statement, continues that, "This can be seen as accounting for the author's ruthless, self-deprecating portrayal of his younger self" (90). She states further: "Coetzee seems to be at pains to avoid any possible accusations of acting as his own advocate, thus only foregrounding the process of alienating the protagonist from the narrator" (90). I would like to suggest that this points to his employment of the fictional biographer Mr Vincent, in *Summertime*, for exactly this purpose. The author, J.M. Coetzee, cannot be relied on to determine his own (textual) truth to the same extent that his biographer cannot be relied on to do so either. Coetzee shows that biographers, those upon whom we rely to define a public figure, are just as untrustworthy. Subsequent interviews make this more apparent.

The second interviewee is Margot Jonker, John Coetzee's cousin. The interesting style that the fictional biographer adopts here is significant, as he takes centre stage – his discourse is unitalicised and he explains to Margot that he has deliberately cut out his "prompts and questions and fixed up the prose to read as an uninterrupted narrative spoken in [her] voice" (87). He proceeds to read it back to her and she complains about his use of the third-person for herself. The biographer explains, "The *she* I use is like *I* but is not *I*" (89). This clearly alludes to the poetic license the biographer employs (and by extension the author).

Mr Vincent reads Margot his third-person account of her connection with her cousin and describes his subject's return to South Africa in "some disgrace" (89) after having been jailed in the USA. Ironically, Margot's sister, queries whether this constitutes criminality. It does not, owing that it was a political protest against the Vietnam War – John was jailed along with 44 other academics. However, Mr Vincent points out that

Carol, Margot's sister, ultimately has ulterior motives for not wishing to be associated with a relative who "has fallen foul of American Law" (90), as she and her husband intend to immigrate to the United Sates. This coming from the pen of the fictional biographer is significant; he takes on the role of the meddler here, clearly distancing Coetzee from the criticism directed to him from Margot's sister. Yet the disapproval becomes clear because "she, Margot, is distressed by her sister's attitude" (90). She states that she is not sure if she can allow Mr Vincent to include that criticism in the biography. What ensues is a discussion on transcription and the effect it might have on form and content, an invitation to assess the novel's construction. Mr Vincent states categorically: "I have not rewritten it, I have simply recast it as a narrative. Changing the form should have no effect on the content. If you feel I am taking liberties with the content itself, that is another question. Am I taking too many liberties?" (91). She responds, "I don't know. Something sounds wrong, but I can't put my finger on it. All I can say is, your version doesn't sound like what I told you" (91). Margot's reservations about, and distrust of, the biographer's methodology, is a warning from Coetzee about the untrustworthiness of the life-writer, particularly one who is unaware of the sensitivities of literary form, and how form and style (the stuff beyond words, or the stuff "after" words) can sway one's perception of the information being imparted. This implication endorses Justin Neuman's statement:

> Within the interviews, Vincent emerges as an untrustworthy custodian at best of stories about Coetzee. He rewrites one interview as a narrative in the subject's voice (an invention he describes as "fairly radical") and then reads it back to her while recording her protestations and disapproval. Vincent is an academic of mediocre creativity, a younger man who never met Coetzee; he ignores repeated rejections of his methodology, including the suspicion that his work won't amount to "anything more than women's gossip" as one of Coetzee's academic colleagues puts it. (218)

Mr Vincent's unreliability (and lack of artistic awareness) as a biographer is made apparent by his mediocrity. He believes that changing the form of a narrative changes little of how we read the information being imparted to us. Yet the novel we hold in our hands becomes something quite different with each new style we encounter. Coetzee stands above his biographer in this instance, dismissing him as a potentially reliable means to get to Coetzee. Mr Vincent's attempt to narrate the transcription of factual information proffered by Margot is deliberately brought into question because there is a confluence of fact and fiction in narrative form here, which seems to be a construct to engage the acolyte reader of Coetzee.

The real author espoused vegetarianism and, in the transcript, Carol, Margot's sister, embarrasses John by asking, "'Aren't you having mutton, John?'… His blush grows desperate" (93-94). It is Margot who saves him: "She lays a reassuring hand on his arm. '*Jy wil seker sê, John, ons het almal ons voorkeure*,' we all have our preferences" (94). After this incident, John and Margot go for a walk and chat comfortably with each other. It is here that the biographer – or perhaps Coetzee himself – delves most deeply into his subject's psyche. He contemplates the incident where he mentions how he regrets pulling off the leg of a locust when he and Margot were children: "'I remember it every day of my life,' he says. 'Every day I ask the poor thing's forgiveness. I was just a child I say to it, just an ignorant child who did not know better. *Kaggen*, I say, forgive me'" (96). Here, Coetzee deliberately links the lowly locust to the mantis called Kaggen which is usually associated with the divine. This desire for absolution not only suggests a deeper spiritual apprehension, but also implies a pantheistic view where the divine is discernible in even a lowly insect. This might be a deliberate guise to position the reader positively towards a subject who is generally viewed as somewhat unfeeling. He goes on to contemplate love and attributes it to their first "meaningful conversation" (97):

> We must have been six years old. What the actual words were I don't recall, but I know I was unburdening my heart to you, telling you everything about myself, all my hopes and longings. And all the time I was thinking, *So this is what it means to be in love!...* And ever since that day, being in love with a woman has meant being free to say everything on my heart. (97)

Here the reader is touched by the idea of innocent child love and the divulging of truth that accompanies the complete trust this relationship evokes. Again, it negates the passive, cold view of the previously created public persona of the subject. The biographer's purpose is deftly achieved by John's explanation of the metaphysical connection of the freedom that love affords. Thus, the biographer reveals something of the persona of the actual author, creating a sense of authenticity by inextricably binding fact and fiction.

Margot's interaction with the fictional biographer is significant. Her protestations about the path of narration the biographer adopts, is similar to breaking the fourth where she intercedes on behalf of the real author and "speaks to the reader" just as the character in a film looks directly at the audience and makes a comment meant only for it. This adds a satirical twist to the reading to mock the credulous reader who assumes that he or she may be familiar with J.M. Coetzee as a person owing to hearsay, and not necessarily through having read his work. The biographer carefully describes the sympathy Margot shows towards John, her *meegevoel*, (97), or empathy, with regard to his vegetarianism and his idealisation of the Karoo. Margot says, "He means it! He speaks of the Karoo as if it were paradise!" (108), and yet she displays earnest disapproval of the young Coetzee's dismembering of the locust. It all culminates in the tenderness of his *Kaggen* prayer, which is a construct to subvert the reader's assumptions about the famous author's private life and character. Cleverly, Mr Vincent's interlocution is interspersed with his admitting to "going too far" (119). He

apologises with, “I am sorry, I must have got carried away. I’ll fix it. I’ll tone it down” (119). The emotional rendering of the narrative seems to have reached the biographer. Through Margot, he is able to discern his subject’s humanity, gets to the heart of his subject, where narrative trickery seems out of place.

Margot writes John a letter filled with advice and seems to give her final analysis of her cousin’s character, which the biographer wittingly fudges. Margot berates John for being a loner and explains that he needs a wife. During this period, the fictional biographer concentrates on Coetzee’s life from 1972–1975. Kannemeyer points out that much that was written in this section is fictional:

> The reader cannot simply accept the information supplied about the late John at face value, and anybody who reads it as “truth” will have been gulled. For instance, Coetzee did after his return to South Africa live in Tokai for a while, but – contrary to what the novel would have us believe – with his wife, Phillipa, and their two children, never with his father. His father was not in 1972–1975 a widower, but married to Vera, who only died in 1985…. The cousin called Margot in *Summertime,* but by her real name Agnes, in *Boyhood,* never spent a night in a bakkie in the Koup near Voëlfontein with Coetzee, and he never intended to buy his father a house in Merweville. (607)

What we are left with, then, presumably, is truth to the character of his subject, with all else that surrounds it a fabrication. This is telling. J.M. Coetzee sends up the facts that surround a life as superfluous to the kind of information that makes that life worth knowing. We are meant to read facts as deceptive, a distraction from what is significant. Facts are not a substitute for a life, and are not meant to be read alongside a life. Significantly, it is Margot who reveals this to us; the biographer (and external “facts”) seem to lead us astray.

Neuman's pertinent comments act as a fitting introduction to the next interviewee, Adriana. He states:

> Coetzee's handling of Mr Vincent as a framing device is deft, however, especially when it comes to mapping mobility. Vincent traverses the globe from Northern England to Paris, Sao Paulo, Ontario, South Africa, and back. Gathering material and interviewing Coetzee's sexual partners, a female cousin, and two academic colleagues. Clever conceit that he is, Vincent's seeming infinite travel budget may strain the bounds of verisimilitude. (132)

This shows exactly the intertwining of reality and fiction attested to before. He goes on to explain how "the most intriguing voices belong to two such unexpected cosmopolitans – [Julia and Adriana Nascimento], a Brazilian who found her way to South Africa from Angola and who makes no effort to hide her loathing for Coetzee" (Neuman 132). Vincent interviews Adriana in her home in Ontario.

Mr Vincent asks Adriana, "*...and you did not allow relations to develop any further – relations between yourself and Coetzee?*" (170). This question results in her pertinent reply through which Coetzee (through Adriana) is able to pose the following Jamesian questions: "What kind of biography are you writing? Is it like Hollywood gossip, like secrets of the rich and famous?" (170). Here Coetzee's metafictional concerns are overt, and his satirical premise seems to be valid as it seems to reproach the unscrupulous writer who might pander to the voyeuristic element that "publishing scoundrels" (James, "Aspern Papers" 127) would rely on to ensure sales. The observant reader must constantly be conscious of the real author's self-reflection (whether through interviewee or otherwise), and aware, also, of his reflections on biography. Theses reflections, posited through various biographical modes, means

that the reader must always wonder if it is a serious depiction of the actual author or just a fictional representation of the subject of Mr Vincent's biography, which he is able to manipulate as he deems fit in order to create his own fiction.

Adriana's assessment of the now-famous writer is often brutal as she matter-of-factly states that he is "solitary. Not made for conjugal life. Not made for the company of women" (171). And when Mr Vincent mentions further letters she had received from him, she says,

> When I did not reply he wrote again. He wrote many times. Perhaps he thought if he wrote enough the words would eventually wear me down, like the waves of the sea wear down a rock. I put his letters away in the bureau; some I did not even read. But I thought to myself, *Among many things this man lacks, the many many things, one is a tutor to give him lessons in love.* Because if you have fallen in love with a woman, you do not sit down and type her one long letter after another, pages and pages, each one ending 'Yours sincerely'... But then I thought , perhaps this is how these Dutch Protestants fall in love: prudently, long-windedly, without fire, without grace. And no doubt that is how his love making would be too, if ever he got the chance. (171-172)

This analysis of John as a lover fits in with Julia's assessment and suggests that there is some consistency between the two accounts of the subject's character at this point in the novel – both saw him as having been cold and lacking passion. Adriana insists, "there was no grand love affair with a dancer, just a brief infatuation, that is the word I would use, a brief one-sided infatuation that never grew into anything" (173). But Mr Vincent counters, "Yet you were important to him. He was in love with you" (174). Again, Adriana denies this: "But the truth is, if he was in love, it was not with me, it was some fantasy that he dreamed up in his own brain and gave my name to" (174-75). It

seems that the fictional biographer has asked the right questions to elicit answers in keeping with the public persona that the real author has created for himself.

Mr Vincent further establishes that Adriana's anger towards John has something to do with his hold over her beautiful daughter as her English tutor. The daughter is furious when she finds out that he has been writing letters to her mother, but Adriana assures her daughter she did not reciprocate and forbade any further communication with him.

Adriana was disturbed by John's attending her Latin American dance classes and eventually asks him to leave, complaining that "he can't dance to save his life" (198) and that Mr Vincent should call his book "*The Wooden Man*" (200). She reflects on how eventually John "gave up his pursuit" of her (191). Vincent responds by saying that "maybe he kept [her] alive in his heart" (191), which implies that she may well have been his muse to a certain extent. The chapter concludes pointedly when she asks him, "Did this man who knew nothing about women ever write about women, or did he just write about dogged men like himself?" (200). And the telling answer from Vincent not only emphasises the important role of himself as the fictional biographer, but the metafictional implications of the influence real-life characters may have on the imaginative apprehensions of the artist. Vincent responds,

> He wrote about men, and he wrote about women too. For example – this may interest you – there is a book named *Foe* in which the heroine spends a year shipwrecked on an island off the coast of Brazil. In the final version she is an Englishwoman, but in the first draft he made her a *Brasileira*. (200)

When Adriana questions what kind of woman "this *Brasileira*" is, Mr Vincent's answer – or J.M. Coetzee's – clearly indicates that she was the inspiration for his novel *Foe*, by his describing her in the following way:

> What shall I say? She is attractive, she is resourceful, she has a will of steel. She hunts all over the world to find her young daughter who has disappeared. That is the substance of the novel: her quest to recover her daughter, which overrides all other concerns. To me she is an admirable heroine. If I were the original character like that, I would feel proud. (200-201)

Adriana reacts to this compliment by resolving to read *Foe*, admitting that despite her reservations about John, she was "interested to see what this man of wood made of [her]" (201). Vincent has elicited this response from her by hinting at her being the possible muse or inspiration for the protagonist in the novel.

Coetzee, the novelist, at least through his biographer, seems to have finally won over his muse, the woman who was once quite dismissive of his creative and personal pursuits. The seduction is contingent on Adriana's belief that the protagonist in *Foe* was inspired by Coetzee's affections towards her. Yet the reader may be aware of how dubious this assumption may be. We can never be sure that Adriana is the muse here because she is English in the novel's final iteration. So, in the same way that we have learnt that we can never be wholly sure that the John Coetzee referred to in the novel is J.M. Coetzee, we cannot be sure that the Adriana in *Foe* is the same Adriana as she appears in the first draft of the novel. The trick pulled off is of the biographer's doing. The biographer's role, for Coetzee, is to point towards creative inspiration. But he is also teasing, and somewhat manipulative. He (a conduit for Coetzee as vengeful lover, perhaps) wins Adriana over with the promise of having inspired a great mind. We can never be sure of the truth behind this, but then neither can Adriana.

In the next transcript, the interviewee is simply referred to as Martin. Mr Vincent again continues his investigation through the "question and answer" technique, with his

questions written in italics and the interviewee's responses in regular type. Martin is John's former university colleague and friend, and his cautionary professionalism hints at the author J.M. Coetzee himself (or at least from what is understood from his public persona) and may well represent him – his queries and literary concerns seem to reflect those of the author, who at times puts his fictional biographer on the spot with questions that pertain to his methodology. It is not by chance that Vincent carefully mentions the third memoir (represented as *Summertime* in the reader's world) along with *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Reality and fiction cross paths once again, though this time achieved through the book the reader holds in her hands.

Martin answers Mr Vincent's query on "white South Africanness" (209) and why "he [John Coetzee] should have stopped just there", to "write no more" (209). Martin suggests that their – his and Coetzee's – eventual emigration from the country was because they "had an abstract right to be there, a birthright, but the basis of the right was fraudulent. [Their] presence was grounded in a crime, namely colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid" (209). He goes on to say, "Let me add one further comment on our stance towards South Africa: that we cultivated a certain provisionality in our feelings towards it, he perhaps more so than I" (211).

This explanation, which is possibly a covert explanation for J.M. Coetzee's own justification for leaving the country of his birth, touches on the confessional writing that Grzeda's comment (at the beginning of this chapter) alludes to, and seems to fulfil the notions of auto-critique, self-questioning and expression of personal grief. The fictional biographer becomes a sounding board of the views of the real author that his readership might construe as truthful and acceptable. Martin goes on further to explain aspects of John's personality, saying, "All I can suggest is that a strain of secrecy seemed to be engrained in him, part of his character, extended to his teaching too" (212). He also says to Mr Vincent:

> His inclination [is] toward the more vatic poets. You must have noticed how rarely he discussed the sources of his own creativity. In part that came out of the native secretiveness I mentioned. But in part also suggests a reluctance to probe the sources of his inspiration, as if being too self-aware might cripple him. (213)

These quotes perhaps reveal the real author's self-explanation (be it truthful or fictional), and when Martin explains that "if you treat your connection with a poet as a personal secret to be closely guarded, and if moreover your classroom manner is somewhat stiff and formal, you are never going to acquire a following" (214). Vincent continues his inquiry and establishes from Martin that his biographical subject is "no talent as a teacher" (214) and yet has made it his career, and he is a "misfit" although a "cautious soul" (214). With reference to Mr Vincent's question regarding John's consorting with his younger students, Martin states that "It would be very naïve to conclude that because the theme was present in his writing it had to be present in his life" (215). Here it is clear that, as Grzeda suggests, there is a reclaiming of space for an "inner dialogue with self" without neglecting "a social public dialogue" (Grzeda 79). Ultimately, we are hearing the echo of the real author's voice and self-critique as he offers answers to the possible questions his readership might raise, ever "engaging to deconstruct the public/private dichotomy" as advocated by Grzeda (79).

Yet, the profound metafictional statement from Mr Vincent is that "in biography one has to strike a balance between narrative and opinion. I have no shortage of opinion – people are more than ready to tell me what they think of Coetzee – but one needs more than that to bring a life-story to life" (216). A personal story is necessary to add interest to the subject's life. One needs more than to know what people think of a subject; one needs to know why one thinks that; one needs evidence, too. Martin then begins to question Mr Vincent's methodology (and thus by implication the methodology adopted by biographers in general, if we are to assume that, in this moment, Mr

Vincent stands as an instantiation of this category of writer) by asking why five interviewees at all, and why choose these five specifically. The voice of J.M. Coetzee seems to intervene here, as the biographer says, “I let Coetzee himself do the choosing. I simply followed up on clues he dropped in his notebooks – clues as to who was important to him at the time” (217). He goes on to say, “But I am not interested in coming to a final judgement on Coetzee. I leave that to history. What I am doing is telling the story of a stage of life, or if we can’t have a single story then several stories from several perspectives” (217). Martin pertinently asks, “And the sources you have selected have no axes to grind, no ambitions of their own to pronounce final judgement on Coetzee?” (217). Martin’s responsive silence is telling as it implies that he does not know for certain if this should be so and yet, to an extent, it is a way of making the subject seem honest. J.M. Coetzee’s self-critique is brutal as he opens himself up to public criticism, and in so doing cleverly creates a public memory of himself for that very history to judge. Coetzee makes the interviewees seem more visible, thus disarming negative criticism of his works or public persona by critiquing himself before anyone else gets a chance to. Martin confirms that two of the female interviewees were emotionally involved with Coetzee and expresses his concern that their accounts of the subject will be “slanted towards the personal and intimate at the expense of the man’s actual achievements as a writer” (218). The Martin chapter concludes with a pertinent statement being made, reflecting similar concerns of Henry James’ writing, namely that it seems strange to Martin “to be doing a biography of a writer while ignoring his writing” (218).

The Martin interview is the shortest of the five. If we are to assume that this is really Coetzee (or as close as we are going to get to the man being represented) then the brevity of the section only reinforces our reading of Martin as J.M. Coetzee: Martin, like the author, as far as his public persona goes, does not have much to say. But that is not the whole game. Martin’s/Coetzee’s lack of extensive engagement may also be read as a deflection. We do not get too much of Coetzee “in his own words” here so

cannot go on all that much to define him. What we are left with, then, are the other interviewees, and, as Martin suggests at the end of the interview, Coetzee's novels themselves. If we want anything more of the man, Coetzee seems to say, then we must turn to the work and abandon the limited biographical form.

Mr Vincent's last interviewee is Mme Sophie Denoël. She is asked questions about how she came to know John Coetzee. She explains their academic relationship against the background of her personal story and how she took up a position at the University of Cape Town. She explains how they taught a joint course in African literature, and that they had a liaison, but that it "did not endure" (224). She questions the biographer on the type of book he is writing before she is prepared to commit herself. She asks, "Is it a book of gossip or a serious book?" (225). Mr Vincent responds,

> I can give you my assurance, it is a serious book, a seriously intended biography. I concentrate on the years from Coetzee's return to South Africa in 1971/72 until his public recognition in 1977. That seems to me an important period in his life, important yet neglected, a period when he was still finding his feet as a writer. (225)

Sophie, clearly the academic, proceeds to question Mr Vincent's methodology as she appears not to be convinced by his reassurance of his intentions. She blatantly says "No. What of his diaries? What of his Letters? What of his notebooks? Why so much emphasis on interviews?" (225). Mr Vincent's response is as follows:

> What Coetzee writes there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record – not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction of himself for his correspondents; in his diaries he is doing much the same for his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity. As

> documents they are valuable, of course; but if you want the truth you have to go behind the fictions they elaborate and hear from people who knew him in the flesh. (226)

Sophie asks, “But what if we are all fictioneers?” (226) and Mr Vincent concedes that, yes, “we are all fictioneers”, but that a set of independent reports might synthesise the whole, and suggests that “a great writer becomes the property of us all” (226). Sophie says Coetzee would laugh at that because the day of the great writer has gone forever. Mr Vincent has to agree with her but adds that a great writer is, to some extent, public property. Sophie, prompted by the biographer’s comments, becomes a spokesperson for Coetzee and states, “What is relevant is what he believed. And there the answer is clear. He believed our life-stories are ours to construct as we wish, within or even against the constraints of the real world” (227).

The above comment reinforces Patrick Flanery’s comment in Kannemeyer’s biography of J.M. Coetzee:

> “The relation between fact and fiction in *Summertime* touches upon the whole question of what truth value the novel may be taken to have, and what application it has to the life of the actual writer J.M. Coetzee. An important key to the character of the fictional dead author, but also to the form that the biography assumes in *Summertime*.” (607)

The comment suggests that the author is one that stands outside the text and the dubious business of using the text to come to know the author. *Summertime* seems less about the life of J.M. Coetzee and more about how an author (any author) stands in relation to her work, how an author’s fiction is read and misread against the facts of her life. In the case of *Summertime*, we have an author, Coetzee, forcing us to reckon with how we read a novel, and whether it is appropriate or not to read the author into

his work. Among the more sensitive matters regarding Coetzee's work are the politics that define it.

The astute reader will perhaps notice the real author's antipathy to petty politics when Sophie tells Mr Vincent that Coetzee's politics are connected to our baser human emotions and are "a symptom of our fallen state and expresses that fallen state" (229). She then warns Mr Vincent, "as a biographer you above all ought to be wary of putting people into neat little boxes with labels on them" (229). She reveals more of how she understood the subject as a "not at-ease person" (231), and that "he longed for the day when everyone in South Africa would call themselves nothing" (232-33). This is perhaps Coetzee's final word on his political stance, the goal to which his political writing is directed. This is apparent in the form of the text as well. The fragmented texts are dated at the start of the novel, and then undated in the concluding fragments. This creates a sense of flux in which people and situations are non-compartmentalised through not restricting the freedom of creativity. Coetzee seems to demonstrate, through his writing, the kinds of politics to which he aspires: an unclassified self, a self that is unlabelled, and untethered even to any (one) generic literary form. The work of Mr Vincent, who tries to box and define a life, tries to narrate it, is undermined.

Speaking as someone intimately connected to Coetzee, Sophie laments the fact that she naively thought she might find herself in *In The Heart of the Country*, which he was writing at the time. She says, "I believed you could not be closely involved with another person and yet exclude her from your imaginative universe" (235). This point seems to niggle. The rest of her comments are denigrating – she sees him as fatalistic and passive:

> John did not have a strong presence…. [I]n all the time I was with him I never had the feeling I was with an exceptional person, a truly exceptional human being. It is a harsh thing to say, I know, but

> regrettably true. I experienced no flash of lightning from him that suddenly illuminated the world. Or if there were flashes, I was blind to them…. But he had no special sensitivity that I could detect, no original insight into the human condition. He was just a man, a man of his time, talented, maybe even gifted, but frankly, not a giant. (242)

She reiterates that, having read his books, she finds him "Too cool, too neat…. Too easy. Too lacking in passion" (242). The interesting aspect of Sophie's analysis is that it hints at the author's own voice coming through. He is self-denigrating and his self-critique is brutally honest, suggesting a kind of humble arrogance that seems to be a construct to create a public persona that might be more acceptable to the acolyte reader. Yet Sophie's femininity and womanliness should not be ignored. John Coetzee as a sexual (or awkwardly sexual) being is discussed at various points in the novel. Four of the interviewees are women (where the fifth interviewee, a man, offers very little to the discussion). That the interviewees are (almost) all women means that their comments are, for the most part, read to be *about* Coetzee, rather than *as* Coetzee in his "own" words. Their gendering suggests that Coetzee may intend for these women to function as a detraction from his own sense of himself in his public capacity.

More sympathy is elicited when we read of how John must contend with his father's terminal illness. Yet: the element of fictioneering is apparent because, according to Kannemeyer, "The reader simply cannot accept the information supplied about the late John at face value, and anybody who reads it as 'truth' will have been gulled" (607). He goes on to explain just how much of the supposed biographical detail supplied in the novel is in fact erroneous. Yet Patrick Flanery in Kannemeyer's biography states that "*Summertime*'s shifty position between biography and fiction becomes a powerful analogy for Coetzee's difficulties positioning himself in the world; it is as we struggle to get to grips with its mixture of disclosure and secretiveness that we come closer to him" (606). Ultimately the fictional biographer is the most powerful

device used in the novel to drive its metaphorical discourse, though it is powerful indirectly, by accident, as his process is undermined at every turn by interviewee and author alike.

There is no doubt that J.M. Coetzee's concern is metafictional in *Summertime.* The novel is written from a postmodern metafictional perspective almost parodying its readership's assumed knowledge of Coetzee's public image by being given exactly the self-denigrating image of the author to the public it assumes it knows. The fragmented structure of the novel being broken up into the author's notes at the beginning and end of the novel and interspersed with the reports of conversations between the fictional biographer, Mr Vincent, and five interviewees who provide a post-mortem account of their interaction with the subject when he was alive, clearly points to the postmodernist character of the novel. The experimental tone of the novel highlights a number of J.M. Coetzee's concerns regarding the writing of autobiography and biography as an interview with David Attwell attests to. In "On the Question of Autobiography: Interview with J.M. Coetzee", Coetzee states,

> Let me treat this as a question about telling the truth rather than as a question about autobiography. Because in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it…. How do I know when I have a truth about myself? (117)

To get to the heart of a person's true character, the assumption would be that an autobiography would be more to the person's reality than could be achieved through the cousin of autobiography, biography, which is observed with caution because of its distance from the subject. Autobiography is assumed to bridge this gap between text and subject. Yet in her essay, "The Illusion of the First Person", Merve Emre is quick

to debunk this assumption, showing, too, that almost all theorists in the field of autobiography do the same:

> Most essayists and scholars who write about the personal essay agree that its "I" [in autobiography or the personal essay] is, by necessity and choice, an artful construction. Watch, they say, as it flickers in and out of focus as a "simulacrum," a "chameleon," a "made-up self," a series of "distorting representations" of the individual from whose consciousness it originates and whose being it registers. (43)

Summertime is a novel that serves to dramatise this thought. The text seems to be the construct through which Coetzee, supposedly, exposes the truth about himself, especially as a writer, playing on what Neuman refers to as "Coetzee's infamous discomfort with celebrity" in a story that "erupts in repeated narrative acts of self-abasement" (130). But, throughout the text, we are never quite sure of who J.M. Coetzee finally is as he evades the reader's definition through various literary styles and guises. The novel seems to ascribe to nearly all the elements of postmodernism, where the role of the fictional biographer is instrumental in posing questions that catapult the narrative into its metafictional exploration. It is almost amusing to have the author imagine himself deceased and then to assign a fictional biographer the task of writing his biography seemingly combining fact and fiction in the process. Even J.C. Kannemeyer, in his orthodox biography of Coetzee, refers to the "ludic element of this novel" (215). This of course alludes to the playfulness associated with postmodernism.

Philosophically Coetzee's evocation of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" is ironic because the reader is meant to assume that J.M. Coetzee the real author is literally dead. However, as Neuman suggests "Coetzee is a fictioneer whom we cannot trust. (*Summertime* after all, holds a counterfactual premise as its founding axiom)" (128). It is precisely because the subject of the biography is dead that the space for

objective description of that subject is possible; the interviewees need not fear reprisals from him should they wish to be critical or honest. The irony lies in the fact that despite the Barthesian idea of the author being "dead" J.M. Coetzee does not lack authority at all. On the contrary – he is the fictioneer constructing his own persona that seems to be self-denigrating but is actually affording the real author further celebrity status, because as Neuman purports, "Coetzee's fictional death and infamous reclusiveness ironically call attention to these sites of celebrity" (130).

Though the matter may be a little more nuanced than this, we must not forget that there are two competing authors *in* the novel (outside *Summertime*, there is J.M. Coetzee, of course). There is John Coetzee, and there is Mr Vincent, the biographer, each man intending to offer a narrative of a life. John Coetzee is dead but Mr Vincent is very much alive, even as a fictional character or biographer. J.M. Coetzee shows throughout the text that the function of the author as dead is much more productive and pleasurable to the reader and the text when the author is alive. Mr Vincent seems only to intrude and interrupt what is most interesting about the form of how John Coetzee's life may be expressed, which the interviewees point out to him over and over in their exchanges. The dead John Coetzee passively allows lies and half-truths to articulate his life narrative, through the interviewees, in a process that offers a much richer impression of the man; than a straight forward autobiography might have done. It is richer because the reader is invited to work Coetzee out as one would a puzzle, because we are invited to play within his story.

Certainly, this unusual autobiography would endorse Virginia Woolf's maxim of New Biography: *Summertime* is not a cold, dull inventory of facts, but a unique way of attempting to combine what seems to be fact and fiction in an imaginary construct to explore the complexities of life-writing through the queries of the fictional biographer who may well be representative of the author to some extent. Certainly, the freedom of fiction and the substance of fact do blend together to create a semblance of

credibility. Mr Vincent uses the first-person voice throughout, establishing his authority in the novel. Of course the irony is that it is the author, J.M. Coetzee, who is putting the queries into his mouth and thus the real author is ultimately in control, which is in keeping with Philippe Lejeune's view that "in exceptional cases" an author "*pretends* to speak about himself as someone else might, by using the third person, or by inventing a fictive narrator to present the author's point of view or tell his life story" (28).

Speaking of the art of autobiography generally, Gudmundsdóttir's following claims are nevertheless applicable to the idiosyncrasies of Coetzee's novel:

> The autobiographer interacts with the past, aware of how difficult it is to recapture it, and therefore uses all that fiction has to offer to let him or her effectively engage with that past. This means that in these texts there are retrospective possibilities, alternative lives and therefore alternative texts, an acknowledgment that this is not the only way the life could have been written, that there are other probably just as valid alternatives. (273)

In trying to grasp the many selves that compose the man, *Summertime* may be understood as a series of improvisations of how to read and write about life (the life of oneself or the life of another). We are first prompted with the question about how to define a life, and we work our way through interviews, novel extracts, diary extracts. Perhaps the parts in their totality are the closest we are able to come to an understanding of a life, perhaps even Coetzee's. In *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, Coetzee mentions how polyvocality and writing are important and that "there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic, a matter of awakening the *countervoices* in oneself and embarking on a speech with them" (92). In the case of *Summertime*, the countervoices are, of course, the interviewees. But if these

dispersed voices are meant to lead us off the track, if they are not Coetzee, the man himself, in the autobiographical sense, then, at the very least, they tell us more about John Coetzee. By the novel's end, we learn of the expressions of a life – not necessarily Coetzee's, but a life in general. In the end, it may be that Coetzee's fictional biographer is set up for failure; he is too singular in his intentions to believe that the biographical form will condense John Coetzee into something that describes his quintessence, his truth. Coetzee's novel, *Summertime*, as a composite of styles, tones, modes, and genres, may be better situated in tending towards something that represents a life in text rather than being limited to a singular biographical style. Its improvised variety is what tends towards something truthful.

Chapter 4: A.S. Byatt

1. The Biographer's Tale (2000)

The title of the novel immediately suggests ambiguity. It suggests that the tale is about a biographee, Scholes Destry-Scholes, but at the same time it may imply that the tale is about the biographer himself , Phineas G Nanson, or a story he wishes to tell. Both are true in the end of this story of a young scholar working through, with obsessive academic dedication, the process of telling the story of a life, an important historical figure and, ultimately, his own.

Paula Backscheider points out that, besides the fact that "biography requires passion and the selective presentation of evidence, [there are] obvious dangers of the academic approach [which] are tendencies towards encyclopaedic recitations of facts – what Tony Tanner once described as an archive that feels like a mausoleum" (xix). This hints at the need for creative interpretation of the facts associated with the subject's life, to escape the tedium of a mere factual account. The crux of *The Biographer's Tale* is the author's metafictional query, regarding adapting a life into artistic expression, in this case a biographical narrative. Thus, while the quest for "truth" in biography is in part the quest for certainty, there is a need for some creative inventiveness on the part of the biographer to establish this truth. This can be achieved with the incorporation of techniques associated with novel or fiction writing.

The fictional biographer's voice is made clear through the narrative form from the outset of the novel and is essential for conveying the above. The prominence of the first-person narrative throughout the tale positions the reader sympathetically towards the protagonist, Phineas G. Nanson. Byatt wittily demonstrates Phineas's dissatisfaction with the postmodern world of theory by connecting his decision to abandon it to a dirty window, which he admits is "an ancient well-worn trope for

intellectual dissatisfaction and scholarly blindness. The thing is, that the thing was also there. A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*" (2). He then says, "I felt an urgent need for a life full of *things"* (4). He ironically goes on to apply a theoretical discourse on what true biography is in his conversation with his mentor, Ormerod Goode, who proffers that "the art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts" (5). He tells Phineas that Scholes Destry-Scholes' biography on Sir Elmer Bole is the "greatest work of scholarship" in his time (5). Byatt, through Nanson's response, uses her fictional biographer to voice reservations about the biographical form and astutely opens a metafictional discourse on questionable perceptions of the genre. Phineas blatantly pokes fun at the convention by calling it "a bastard form, a dilettante pursuit. Tales told by those incapable of true invention, simple stories for those incapable of true critical insight" (5). His insults adopt a sexist bent when he goes on to say that the biographies are, "distractions constructed by amateurs for lady readers who would never grapple with *The Waves* or *The Years* but liked to feel they had an intimate acquaintance with the Woolfs and with Bloomsbury" (5). He ends this statement by calling biography "a gossipy form" (5). Admittedly, he does concede that he "remarked, perhaps brashly," but Byatt's wit is delightfully apparent because *The Waves* and *The Years* are written by a *lady* after all.

Phineas clearly does not understand the biographical form that Woolf expounds. In Woolf's essays on the matter, she notes that *The Waves* is a novel that contains no "facts", although it does seem to conform to an autobiographical format as it is concerned with the fictional lives of seven characters who narrate their own stories. Some critics read these seven characters as instantiations of Woolf's identities, and Woolf herself tentatively suggests that *The Waves* (referred to as *The Moths* in its early versions) may be classified as such: "Autobiography it might be called" ("Writer's Diary" 140). *The Waves* took its creative toll on the author; it is a novel comprised of no plot, nothing external to which she could have directed her creative efforts – no facts. Instead, it is a novel of style, written "by rhythms chiefly" ("Writer's Diary" 160).

The Years, Woolf's last novel that she would see published in her lifetime, came after *The Waves*. Woolf retreated from the difficulty of writing towards a rhythm and sought creative solace in "facts": "I want to give the whole of the present society [in *The Years*] – nothing less: facts, as well as vision" ("Writer's Diary" 191). She purports that *The Years* is "different from the others of course: has I think more 'real' life in it; more blood and bone" ("Writer's Diary" 263). Phineas misses any of this literary history to which he speaks with such confidence. He does not appreciate that the two novels are distinct in both form and purpose, regarding the relationship between facts, biography, and art.

Ormerod Goode does not "spare the rod" as he remonstrates his protégé by suggesting that Phineas should consider that gossip is not to be ignored as it is "an essential part of human communication" (5). But the word "gossip", as defined by Oxford Languages dictionary, is problematic regarding the quest for truth – it is defined as "casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true." And the Cambridge Dictionary goes even further, stating that gossip is "conversation or reports about other people's private lives that might be unkind, disapproving, or not true". Goode might have a point by inferring that gossip may offer added personal insight into the life of a biographee. However, both definitions emphasise a lack of truth, which the author is possibly critiquing, especially as the respected Professor Ormerod Goode points out that "great biography is noble" precisely because each human being is unique, and it is a noble pursuit to explore the whole individual (5). This raises the question of the reliability of gossip as an indicator of the truth, or of "the whole man" being revealed truthfully, if the information garnered is erroneous. The latter brings into question the integrity of using the term "noble pursuit" when referring to the art of biography, because deliberate untruth cannot be equated with the truth one associates with being "noble". Yet if we are to dismiss gossip as a reliable source of information in the production of a biography, then what we are left with is the kind of staid document against which

Woolf and other subsequent proponents of life-writing sought to write against. The rest of the novel witnesses Phineas grapple with this and much else regarding his commitments to, and revelations about the craft of biography.

Goode goes on to deflate Nanson's sexist remark through his egalitarian comment, "What resources – scientific, intellectual, psychological, historical, linguistic and geographic – does a man – or a woman – not need, who would hope to do justice to such a task?" (5). Evidently, Byatt lays the foundation for an intellectual exposition on the merits of biography writing and uses the fictional biographer as her chief evaluator of the biographical genre, despite his feeling "more than a little slewed" (6). Phineas reads the Scholes Destry-Scholes biography on Sir Elmer Bole and is intrigued by the biographer himself and becomes obsessed with the idea of writing a biography of the biographer, the genre he initially decries. Byatt shows how Phineas ironically does not realise how misguided his views are initially – he at first believed biographical writing to be an inferior form of writing, but then becomes so intrigued that Byatt has him fulfil one of Virginia Woolf's contentions (from her essay "The Art of Biography"): she states that a character "is as much the subject of his own irony and observation as they [her other characters] are. He lies in wait for his own absurdities as artfully as for theirs" (153). Byatt exposes Phineas for the critical novice biographer he is, that he is in fact absurdly ironic precisely *because* of his ignorance of not only Woolf, but also of the relationship between facts, biography, and art.

Phineas encounters numerous obstacles in his search for the truth regarding Scholes Destry-Scholes who did not seem to tell the truth exclusively. Phineas realises that biographical truth is questionable, yet he is still so enthralled with the text – despite realising is a combination of fact and fiction – that this becomes a springboard for his questioning of the biographical form itself. The latter hints at authorial intention once again as Byatt's use of two fictional biographers become pivotal to the metafictional discourse embedded in the novel. At the Linnean Society, it is Fulla Biefeld who tells

him that Linnaeus (who along with Ibsen and Galton were Destry-Scholes' subjects of interest) never went to the Maelstrøm or climbed the Tornea – "It is Linnaeus's little untruth. Big lie maybe…. He romanced it" (112). She offers to look over his documents as she frowns over Destry-Scholes' carbon:

> This is a tissue of truths and half-truths, and untruths, I rather suspect…. It is true Linnaeus was interested in superstition and magic. But all this spirit-journey is most unlikely, most. On the other hand, the *Furia Infernalis* is authentic. There are inauthentic fabrics here suspended from authentic hooks. Why would anyone do that? (118-119)

Unwittingly, Phineas replies he "didn't know" and that "maybe Destry-Scholes was trying to become a fiction writer" (118). Phineas does not yet realise that the appropriate answer to that question is this: for the sake of a good story; to demonstrate that narrative necessitates some invention; to demonstrate that, to get to truth, one must occasionally lie. This oversight suggests that Phineas is intellectually naïve and binaristic, as he is not prepared to accept a middle road; he is unable to recognize how art and truth cohere and inform one another. This is clear when he responds to Fulla Biefeld, saying, "I said flatly that I wasn't sure where to go next. I might have to give up this project for lack of information. I expected it would be no great loss, I heard myself saying, more especially if what I found was all a tissue of lies" (119).

Byatt is adapting Roland Barthes's statement in his essay "The Death of the Author", where he declares that a "text is a tissue of quotations, drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (146). A text is never a singular work by a singular author. Where Phineas seems to err is that he assumes he as the author should have the power to extrapolate the truth from his collection of truthful or factual findings; he has not yet understood Barthes's all-encompassing view that the writer's (or biographer's) "only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to

rest on any one of them" (146). Furthermore, Byatt is implying through her manipulation of her fictional biographer exactly what Barthes ascribes to, namely that "a text's unity lies not in its origins but in its destination [or audience]" (148). This suggests of course that the reader is important in this process as the interpreter of the text, the person who must finally synthesise the various strands of information, cultural references, plot, character motivations, and so on. It is within the reader that the story coalesces. The reader is also the person who is willing to suspend self in disbelief to be entertained and to engage on a specific level with some aspects of the necessary truth required for the authentication of the biographee's existence, whether in the real or fictional realm.

The essential underpinning of truth and fiction (as binaries or complements), is reiterated repeatedly in the text. Celia Wallhead, in an article titled "Metaphors for the self in A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*", captures exactly what Phineas encounters. She states, "the work of some biographers has taken on the imaginative qualities of the novel for the purpose of rendering a 'truer' version of the subject than a purely factual one might have given us" (291). Byatt, through the fictional biographer, raises the question of the authenticity associated with biography. Phineas works through these same questions while he investigates his subject; the reader becomes invested in these questions, too.

Phineas expounds upon his developing connection with Fulla Biefeld, the Swedish bee taxonomist, who is happy to "look into his documents" for him and aid him in his part-time work at Puck's Girdle. Puck's Girdle is a travel agency that promises unique adventures for eccentric travellers; it is a company that seeks to expose its clients to parts of the world less familiar, less readily documented in travel brochures. They and their customers find value in the less beaten track. Phineas says of his new employers, an eccentric couple,

> I watched Erik and Christophe feed and expand the imaginations of their customers… from an expert in medieval stained glass tracking a particular glazier from England across Europe to Assisi, to a bird-watching taxi driver, who had been through the Indian jungle, the African savannah, the Amazon, on elephants, in range rovers and dugouts and wanted something new. (123-24)

The imaginative aspect of their travel ideas informs the fictional or narrative power that inspires curiosity and, ultimately, a more profound appreciation for the traveller's sphere of interest that is something akin to the fantastic or the fabulous. In his biographical project, Phineas seeks to find something that is quite different from this, being affronted by anything fanciful that has crept into the texts of his subject's life. It is through working with this small company that Phineas begins to see the value of deviating from the cold facts of the world. He is drawn into an imaginative vocation where mystery and the out-of-the-ordinary are attached to the real to make it more appealing to the traveller needing more.

It is not surprising that his new employers are encouragingly enthusiastic about Phineas's Destry-Scholes project which involves the adventurers, Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen. All three of Destry-Scholes' subjects were travellers, and their stories, at least as they are rendered through Destry-Scholes' productive imagination, are embellished with "spiritual" visions (126). It is the intriguing, imaginative inclinations of Destry-Scholes, fraught with some authenticity and the added spice of fiction, that lands Phineas the job at the agency.

Phineas quickly discovers the trickiness of ascertaining what is truth and what is interpretation, embellishment or exaggeration in the three documents Destry-Scholes left behind in their depiction of the three men – whose names are not mentioned, adding further mystery – yet it is not the "full" story of each life, because each narrative

seems to entail notes and scraps of ideas that were possibly the groundwork for future biographies. However, Byatt is careful to emphasise the factual or "truthful" aspects of the three men being researched through the inclusion of photographs, which immediately seem to add authenticity to the biographical details. But at the same time, she has her main protagonist, Phineas G. Nanson, discredit photographs completely when he encounters them amongst Destry-Scholes' "things", shown to him by his radiologist lover, and niece of Destry-Scholes, Vera Alphage, who discovers the pictures. He wonders if any of the images portrayed in the photographs might be Destry-Scholes, still sceptical of their authenticity since the texts that accompany them are of dubious fidelity. Phineas says, "I hate photographs…. Roland Barthes was right, in his book on photography, to say that photographs are essentially involved with death. This creature was living, and will be dead, a photograph says, according to Barthes" (140). Louisa Hadley comments that "Barthes argues that a photograph invokes an absence in its foreshadowing of death" but goes on to say as well that "every photograph is a certificate of presence" (87). Phineas seems to miss that an object, text, or person may be more than one thing at the same time.

When Phineas asks Vera Alphage if she thought that "any of the photographed faces might be Destry-Scholes", Phineas tells us, "she said she didn't know, adding strangely that it wasn't the surface of faces that interested her" (141). Vera, then, is interested in subtext, the implications of texts, of pictures. Of course, the reader realises later that she is a radiologist and is speaking of X-rays, though her interest in that which is less obvious still holds; she says she is interested in "pictures of the living, not the dead. Some of them are worn or damaged, but they're alive, they're pictures of our inner life, so to speak" (187). Vera is able to recognise the multiplicity embedded in texts. Given these points, X-rays (especially as Vera understands them) may be considered differently, not as human interiority but as interesting shapes and forms; they may well be interpreted as works of art reflecting the unreal or an other-worldly reality, and thus are in a sense very different from photographs, which ostensibly

represent the ordinary real. This clearly hints at the multi-layered aspect of the human psyche, which Phineas eventually will have to understand goes beyond mere physical facts; it incorporates the metaphysical and necessary textual considerations after all. These profound aspects of trying to capture the life of a subject resonate with Soji Cole's article titled "The Autobiography as a Photograph" in which he states that

> Life is never frozen. It is continual, until that moment when the subject slips into the realm of mortality. If a photograph is frozen in time and space, how does it properly account for a subject that is both plastic and continuous? We can ask this question of the autobiography as well. (1)

Cole elaborates by asking how the photographic subject might look an hour after the photograph had been taken, and notes that this change would not be documented by the photograph (1). Similarly, with autobiography, "what happens to the life of the subject after the autobiography has been published?" (1). Unless the specific time frame is provided, of course, the implication is exactly the same: the subject of the autobiography might be very different after the text's publication; indeed the very writing of the work might result in personal growth or cynicism or even mental health issues depending on the level of trauma divulged in the autobiography, for instance, as in the cases of holocaust or rape victims.

With a more optimistic understanding of photographs, we may appreciate the power of their particularities, especially in how they function in relation (or as a complement) to memory. Photographs, and (auto)biographies, too, locate us in a fixed time, yet our attitudes, interpretations and feelings towards them may change as we change. Such an understanding breaks the assumed temporal fixity of photographs and (auto)biographies. Our development and change over time allows photographs and (auto)biographies to respond in kind, an appreciation of the forms more in line with

Vera's openness to the multiplicity of an image. There is now also temporal multiplicity to the visual mode.

The suggestion that life is ever-changing or mutable is echoed by how Byatt speaks of the idea of the plasticity of photographs.In these circumstances, truth is compromised as the subject's true character may be embellished. Before photographs, this notion may be found in how portrait artists may embellish paintings of her subject to hide or omit flaws to flatter the subject and thereby misrepresent her. It has always been and will always be the case that we cannot necessarily look to images alone for truth – extraneous factors must corroborate their truth. And even if photographs or autobiographies are found to be true, we are still left with the likelihood that their truth is changing. All we can say of their truth is that it was true at the time, in that instant. A subject can change moments after a photograph has been taken, or the writing of autobiography or biography can be consciously or unconsciously slanted. Cole complicates the matter further:

> The photograph does not tell the whole story of the subject. The subject decides which angle of the image he/she wants portrayed – whether it is taken as a "selfie" or a full frame image by a photographer (and here I also refer to biography). The autobiography compels the same logic as the photograph. It is driven by a consciousness in which the portrayal of the self contains some level of manipulation that is projected towards acceptance of personal identity. That is to say, the autobiography, just like the photograph, is a means of identity construction. (2)

This form of manipulation demonstrates how art obscures truth, in some instances to malicious ends, and in others not. The subject of the (visual or textual) work can never be completely true-to-life, and readers ought to be aware that what is reproduced is a mere re-presentation of the thing that exists in the real world – it can never be,

naturally, the thing itself. As Roland Barthes points out in *Camera Lucida*, the "'photographic referent' [is] not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (76) The word "optionally" suggests that it is not the manipulated view of a desired reality that constitutes the image but rather the capturing of a reality that is close to the truth of that image. So, it makes sense when Phineas states that "the photographs of the truly dead are not shocking as the photographs of the living are shocking. For one thing their eyes are decently closed, and not dead paper spaces" (179). Here the suggestion is that photographs of the living are "images of authenticity, but not reality" (Cole 1). Phineas is – to some extent – subconsciously aware of the precarity of the "facts" he originally set out to apprehend in his research of Destry-Scholes, especially regarding photographs: he admits the moment captured, although ostensibly authentic, does not reflect the immutable truth.

Phineas then turns to newspapers (in conjunction with photographs). He pursues the "factual" newspaper report on Destry-Scholes's death, and hopes to see a photograph of his subject, confident that that would be a site of "truth". We must bear in mind that newspapers too are texts very similar to photographs – they too capture manipulated moments. All things considered, without sounding too cynical, newspapers are sometimes notorious for bending and twisting facts for their specific readerships:

> The news media and the government are entwined in a vicious circle of manipulation, mythmaking, and self-interest. Journalists need crises to dramatize news, and government officials need to appear to be responding to crises. The two institutions have become ensnared in a symbiotic web of lies that the news media are unable to tell the public what is true. (Weaver 1)

It is thus ironic, as Hadley succinctly put it, that Phineas has a need "to verify Destry-Scholes's existence to justify a biographical account of him [through a newspaper clipping]" (9), but all he manages to secure is the newspaper cutting which reports the following:

> Hope is extinguished for the British writer, Scholes Destry-Scholes, who left the fishing-port on the island of Vaerøy, in the Lofoten Islands, in a small boat a week ago. The boat was found, with no-one on board, not far from the Moskenes Current, more famous by its fifteenth-century name, the Maelstrøm. (249)

Phineas dispassionately adds that "the photograph that accompanied the text was of a dark rowboat, floating on choppy water" (249). Phineas finds the photograph after enlisting the help of Professor Jepersen. Of the image that accompanies the clipping, Jespersen says, "'Lots of those…. Lots of that motif, the empty boat on the water. I've got nearly fifty of them. They like to get Mosken in, and the gannets. Picturesque'" (248). Jespersen implies that the photograph is a stock image, one indistinguishable from the dozens available. While it is a genuine photograph, it bears no specific or meaningful relation to the story that accompanies it. The boat could be any boat, a generic object there merely for illustrative purposes.

Barthes notes that a newspaper is "a complex of concurrent messages with the photograph at the centre and surrounds constituted by the text, the title, the caption, the lay-out and, in a more abstract but no less 'informative' way, by the very name of the paper" (15). He goes on to suggest that all these elements together can "heavily orientate the reading of the message" depending on the conservatism or liberalism of the publication (15). Phineas goes on to mention in the first-person narrative that "the paper was the *Yorkshire Post*", and "he just stared at the empty boat, and the dark newsprinted water" (249). Phineas, through his lack of emotional response to this

disappointment, almost cynically reinforces the unreliability of locating facts about another person which he thought might be indisputable. Furthermore, there is a subtle irony in his mentioning it was reported in the *Yorkshire Post*, a relatively unimportant publication from the county where Destry-Scholes was born, and that it states somewhat disparagingly that "Mr Destry-Scholes achieved some success with his three-volume biography" (248). The three-volume biography by the great biographer of the famous polymath, Sir Elmer Bole, of which Phineas was initially so admiring, is made out not to be so important after all. A line stands out in the newspaper report: "The search for authenticity in scholarship can have its dangers" (249). Amidst the dry facts of Destry-Scholes' life and death, the sentence reads almost as a non sequitur. It also, anachronistically, reads as a warning to Phineas. Feeling despondent, Phineas thanks Jespersen for his help, leaves, and abandons his project altogether. There is too much that detracts from the authenticity he seeks, too much that suggests that his interest in the project is misguided. Yet he is able to salvage something after all.

Celia Wallhead writes that

> [Phineas] finds little trace of Destry-Scholes. The character has not emerged, and Phineas discovers the only things he can be sure of, and then not completely, are the events of his own life – precisely what he meant to suppress from his account. (293)

Louisa Anne Hadley, in her article "Victorian Biography and *The Biographer's Tale*", highlights what she refers to as "the limitations of biographical discourse itself in dealing with the individual" (6). Hadley seems less certain than Wallhead of the novel's suggestion that we can know anything from the process of producing a biography. Hadley also shows that "the inadequacy of biographical discourse for considerations of identity is enacted in the novel through the blurring of boundaries between biography, autobiography and fiction" (6). The novel's end suggests otherwise, at least

as far as we assume that we learn more of Phineas than of Destry-Sholes. In the end, Destry-Scholes emerges as a foil for Phineas' life. In the same way that we learn something of the shape of John Coetzee from his interviewees in *Summertime*, so do we learn more of Phineas, the biographer, through (his search for) his biographical subject. Phineas assumes a reflected identity, which Byatt shows is the closest one can come to learn of a subject's authentic self. Indeed, the suggestion is that part of why we know almost nothing of Destry-Scholes in the end is because of Phineas' dogged dedication to authenticity, because of his determination to study his subject head-on. Looking Destry-Scholes in the eye results only in evasion and obscurity. Byatt believes it is paramount in the writing of the life of the subject that there is symbiosis of fact and fiction.

Finally, Phineas can only learn about himself and, as many critics have suggested, his would-be biography turns into his own autobiography or *Bildungsroman*, despite his own reservations earlier when he categorically stated, "the last thing I have any interest in is writing – I mean this – is an autobiography" (99). He goes on to justify his claim by insisting that he is "writing in the first person for the sake of precision, because this procedure allows me to say certain things I am reasonably sure of" (100). Byatt's intentions for Phineas' justifications are different to his own. Byatt uses the fictional biographer to explore the essence of self, or as Wallhead suggests, to "investigate the selfhood of a person" (291). And so Byatt is suggesting that, willingly or unwillingly, one always returns to the self – it is inevitable – even when one intends to write on others. It would seem that it is impossible for biography ever to be mere biography – through the fictional biographer we realise that the biographer always intercedes.

That Phineas writes about himself through Destry-Scholes validates, too, the importance of documenting lives that are not readily documented, a Woolfian sentiment:

> Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography – the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what is smallness? He must revise our standards and set up new heroes for our admiration. (125)

Through her fictional biographer's decision to write the biography of the biographer Destry-Scholes, Byatt inadvertently implies that it is not only great historical figures that deserve recognition but also the mere biographer who traditionally saw himself as insubordinate to his great subject. Phineas is "small" as he represents the kind of "everyman" rather than a world-renowned celebrity figure.

Thus, by the end of the novel Phineas admits that he is "writing a story, a story that in an aleatory way has become a first-person story, and, from being a story of a search told in the first person, has become, I have to recognize – a first-person story proper, an autobiography" (250). He realises that the change of direction which began in Gareth Butcher's filthy-windowed seminar room has ended in Thorold Jesperson's room with a filthy semi-skylight window, where he would stare at the press photograph of the empty boat. The irony lends itself to Byatt's gentle, humorous incorporation of the former (the dirty window profundity) which seems to go beyond the "intellectual and scholarly blindness" trope, as it offers clarification for Phineas – he works against his own scholarly blindness – he is finally able to see clearly where he stands in relation to his aspirations to be the biographer of a renowned subject. Yet he still goes on to explain how he detests autobiography: "I detest autobiography. Slippery, unreliable, and worse, imprecise" (250). This, of course, reads similarly to his understanding of Destry-Scholes in the end. He claims that he will "stop writing this story" (250). He then explains how he has become addicted to writing for pleasure and confesses to have found his voice as a writer (250-251). It is ironic that on the one hand he professes he will stop writing the story of his life with its autobiographical undertones, and then the reader notes that he has come to the realisation that fiction,

facts, and truth have their own form of creative incentive which he cannot resist, despite his expressed reservations. Phineas has learnt something of the process of writing in the end, even if he is unable to properly (or willingly) identify what that is.

Having found himself through his investigations of Destry-Scholes' (Phineas' biographical subject), it may be that Destry-Scholes may be found through the same means: Destry-Scholes' biographical subjects in turn. As Wallhead suggests, "the projection of one or more of a writer's selves may participate in the creation of characters" (295). This may suggest that the absence of the dead biographer, Scholes Destry-Scholes, may not be the "truth". Aspects of the three biographical fragments his biographer, Phineas, discovers of Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen may well contain fragments of Destry-Scholes' "selves" in their portrayal of those others. Wallhead demonstrates how the choice of the three subjects is not arbitrary: each one metaphorically stresses an important aspect of their author, Destry-Scholes, and perhaps even Byatt herself, as well as important aspects of writing biography (295). As Phineas tells us, Destry-Scholes has "deliberately woven his own lies and inventions into the dense texture of collected facts" (101). Wallhead takes us through each of Destry-Scholes' choices of biographical subject, showing how each tells us something of Destry-Scholes' character. For Linnaeus, Phineas tells us that, " [Destry-Scholes] is deliberately choosing as a linguist, a scientist who thinks of himself as the second Adam, the separator, the taxonomist, the Namer of Species" (55). Wallhead explains that Byatt is "stressing the importance of language to differentiation and classification, and of classification to an understanding of the individual in the world" (299). Wallhead continues: "In Galton, Destry-Scholes chooses a statistician and eugenicist but also a mental researcher", not afraid to subject himself to experiments "to discover more of the unconscious mind" (58). But Ibsen, the dramatist, Wallhead states, "was obsessed with being himself" (87). Wallhead suggests that through Ibsen, Byatt "is analysing literary creativity" (301) and she "is thus able to articulate in interesting ways ideas on abstractions concerning selfhood, language, biography and

creativity" (291). Through these subjects, Byatt uses the biographer, Destry-Scholes, who himself becomes a subject of biography, to show that biography is used as a mode to represent not the subjects of these biographies, but to represent the biographer himself: Destry-Scholes is able to "project himself onto others, such as Bole or Linnaeus and write as if he were one of them" (Wallhead 300). We also, finally, learn something of Byatt.

Above biography, *The Biographer's Tale*, according to Wallhead, centralises language as its main concern: the novel is about "the issue of creation or self-creation of the self", and is especially "an attempt to come to terms with 'self' through language":

> Phineas and Destry-Scholes discover that it is through writing that one searches for identity, whether that be the object study or the true identity of the subject or writer, for writing can change, develop or confer identity. Phineas becomes a new man through his experiences in search of another man's self, and this is because he extends his spheres of action, his linguistic models and his versatility or adaptability in them. (294)

Mariadele Boccardi suggests, in her book titled *A.S. Byatt*, that "Nanson moves in a postmodern world of linguistic hyper-awareness where even the things in front of his eyes and within reach of his touch are pre-emptively connoted by the words used to refer to them" (85). The author suggests that it is from within the framework of his linguistic self-awareness where "at several points he corrects himself on using words that have become part of his post-structuralist armoury," that he tries "to transcend language and commune with things" (85). Boccardi seems to suggest that Phineas begins the story by attempting to discard the textual world of postmodern literary theory in his quest for a life "full of things… full of facts" (4), but ironically veers towards fiction and the descriptive lure of the text.

Consequently, as Phineas is unable to unearth "incontrovertible facts" about his subject's life and death in the Maelstrøm, Boccardi credibly points out that "all that Phineas' efforts dig up is confirmation of Destry-Scholes's textually constructed identity and it seems, exclusively textual existence" (86). This clearly suggests that the only evidence of Scholes Destry-Schloes' existence is in the texts he wrote, that he has "a textually constructed identity" (86). Boccardi also goes on to show how objects like carbon copies of lecture notes are "a derivative thing as it were. Their material significance pales in comparison to their potential for analysis and interpretation within the linguistic paradigm in which they exist" (86). Boccardi seems to be implying that the "thing" Destry-Scholes is so obsessed with initially is not as significant as the interpretive implication of the actual text. Thus, the inference made by Boccardi is that "language eventually displaces action, texts replace things, narrative supersedes mere facts" (86). It is through these postmodern inflections that the novel reiterates the power of the word.

Postmodernism is critiqued blatantly from the outset of the novel. Phineas likes Professor Ormerod Goode who would correct inaccuracies in the seminars where, "No one cared much for these interventions. Inaccuracies can be subsumed as an inevitable part of postmodern uncertainty, or play, one or the other or both" (2). The tone of this statement is nonchalant and critical. In addition, Byatt has her protagonist categorically state, "I have decided to give it all up. I've decided I don't want to be a postmodern literary theorist" (3). Professor Ormerod Goode responds with "Let's drink to that" (4). This coming from a joint Head of Department who should be endorsing his department's courses shows his antipathy towards accepted postmodern concepts which seem too far removed from reality.

According to Stefan C. Cizmar in his article, "The Subversion of Postmodernism in *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*", "what these novels put in the centre of their stories is postmodernism itself, as well as literary studies in general, and thus they use

a postmodern style of writing to analyse and subvert it, and to draw attention to its flaws as a tool for discussing literature and history" (3). Cizmar goes on to show how one of the flaws of postmodernism is the "dominance of postmodern thought" (4) as opposed to actually "analysing the specific text" and that "it ultimately removed the joy of reading and replaced it with theoretical musings" (4). He shows how Byatt has her fictional biographer, Phineas, blatantly complain about this when he says,

> One of the reasons why I abandoned – oh, and I have abandoned – post-structuralist semiotics, was the requirement to write page upon page of citations from Foucault (or Lacan or Derrida or Bakhtin) in support of the simplest statement, such as that a scene of Shakespeare may be simultaneously comic and tragic – which earlier critics were able to say without all this paraphernalia. (114)

Thus, through Phineas, the novel vacillates between the merits and pitfalls of biography, between the virtues and vices of postmodernism and its language. The irony, of course, is that Byatt, demonstrating that she is in full control of this argument, sets Phineas' reservations of (auto)biography and postmodernism within a text that ends up reading as an autobiography, a conceit that also lends itself to postmodern critique.

2. Possession (1990)

Possession has been called the ultimate love story, spanning two timeframes within an imaginative construct designed for not only entertainment but scholarly metafictional discourse. The subtitle of *Possession*, "*A Romance*", suggests the frames by which we may read the novel: as a (dual) love story of two erstwhile lovers, one a pair of Victorian England poets, the other a pair of academics studying said

poets at a time in which the novel is published; and as a novel in and of itself (that it presents itself purely as a work of fiction). The poets are Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte; the academics are Dr Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell.

Besides Roland and Maud, who are eager to possess all the information they can find on Randolf Henry Ash, there are multiple researchers – both male and female (gender roles are a significant aspect of our appreciation of the novel) – who wish for the same. There is Professor Mortimer Cropper, a biographer whose "collection of Ash's disparate relics", according to Mariadele Boccardi,

> locates the presence in the past in individual objects [and] in fact are only valued in themselves, for their material possession, to which Cropper attaches the importance of a connection across the historical divide with their original owner. Their value is emotional rather than historical. (69)

Cropper's "emotional" attachment to objects associated with the famous poet suggests that his interest in the objects is unlike the other academics'. Cropper does not appreciate the fullness of the object. It is mere possession for him. As such, he becomes the antagonist because he is willing to forego all semblance of moral conduct to secure Ash's correspondences – even robbing his grave! Mitchell is the part-time research assistant to the editor of Ash's poetry, Professor James Blackadder, and who is by comparison to Cropper's motivations sincerely invested in the research of the former through his genuine desire to establish the truth about Ash. Thus, through the role of the fictional biographers in *Possession*, Byatt brings into focus the different motives behind biographical research, as well as the methods of each type of research, using all the significant characters to reflect her authorial views.

Byatt's introductory reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's preface to *The House of Seven Gables* clarifies that the author wishes primarily to define her novel as a romance. (Hawthorne's gothic novel was originally subtitled with "*A Romance*" when it was first published in 1851.) A romance is organically associated with the concept of truth, as she elucidates with the following quote from Hawthorne in reference to the novel (to which "romance" is etymologically linked) as a form or mode of representation:

> While as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart – has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing and creation. (qtd. in Byatt (1))

Byatt's text is a work of fiction, and makes no claims otherwise. It is also a work of fiction that is primarily concerned with truth (discussed to in the extract above)., albeit literary truth. Byatt's novel straddles the tension that emerges from combination of these preoccupations: what can be said about (biographical) truth through a 500-page lie, the novel seems to ask. The acquisition of truth is the goal of all characters in this text. All characters are possessed by the need to know the truth regarding their subjects.

Byatt quotes Hawthorne's definition of "romance" in her novel: "The point of view in which this tale comes under Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us" (qtd. in *Possession* 1). The novel's other preoccupation, then, is also historical continuity: how present is linked to past in terms of expressions of love, in terms of historical context, in terms of how literatures of the past embed themselves in subsequent literatures. Byatt explores the dynamics of this concern in how Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte

experience true love, albeit forbidden within the Victorian era, compared to how Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell fall in love in the present time, albeit that the way they do so is reserved and tentative and not frowned upon in the liberal, modern time in which they live. The parallel love affairs seamlessly connect the two timeframes. Byatt's metafictional contention is made clear in *Possession* in Sabine de Kercoz's Journal begun on the 13th October 1859, when she is enamoured of her writer cousin Christabel LaMotte, who advises her on writing by saying,

> A writer only becomes a true writer by practicing his craft, by experimenting constantly with language, as a great artist may experiment with clay or oils until the medium becomes second nature, to be moulded however the artist may desire. (335)

Here, Byatt overtly declares how important linguistic experimentation is for the author. *Possession* fulfils that requirement perfectly – Byatt adopts various styles within the novel, which points at the acute awareness of the artifice, mutability, and development of their craft, not only for where the modern or postmodern writer is concerned in the writing of fiction, but also for Victorian realist writers as suggested by LaMotte and de Kercoz. *Possession* is, in part, a novel about the modern history of storytelling.

Apart from the subtitle, *Possession* also holds multiple meanings, many of which will be explored throughout the chapter. To begin with, Michael McGoodwin goes on to say that Byatt wanted to write about "the relations between living and dead minds" in *Possession*, and, by way of question, interrogates some of the ways the title may be interpreted: "Does the literary scholar possess the author who is the object of her research or vice versa?" (2). To stand briefly above the text, Boccardi suggests that Byatt is one such author who is somewhat suspicious about her position as possessor of the novel she has produced.

In her essay titled “A Resistance to Biographical Readings”, Boccardi states “the figure of the author hovering at the edges of the text, observing without speaking, almost unnoticed, yet most definitely there, aptly sums up Byatt’s view of what her place with regard to her novel should be” (30). Byatt even states in her lecture, “Identity and the Writer”, that one of her aims was “to expunge the presence of the self, the presence of the ‘I’ from my idea of writing” (23), a sentiment that Christien Franken glosses over as a dislike for “the writer as somebody who autobiographically expresses him- or herself in fiction” (qtd. in Boccardi 29), when instead writing serves (or should serve) as “an escape from self towards the imagination of other worlds, other people’s minds, lives, feelings and thoughts” (qtd. in Boccardi 29). Thus, Byatt intends to dispossess the self in writing. The use of multiple fictional “scholarly voices” in *Possession* is arguably, as in *Summertime*, a polyvocal experiment by the author – a means to distance herself (the autobiographical Byatt) from the text at hand even though her intellectual presence is evident.

In *Possession*, the same applies to sex, sexuality, and gender. Among the more obvious patriarchal villains in Byatt’s novel is Professor Blackadder. Through her fictional researcher/biographer, Byatt critiques the male perspective of Professor Blackadder, who, though he lives in the novel’s present, is an instantiation of Victorian patriarchy, as Adrienne Shiffman points out in her article titled “Burn What they Should Not See”, stating that Blackadder “is a modern extension of the Victorian ideology of separate spheres” (96), suggesting the male and female domains of existence in essence are disconnected. Again, Byatt shows how there is historical continuity also with patriarchal sentiments – we find more than just their historical traces in the present.

Byatt’s characters, Ash and LaMotte (both published poets), along with Ash’s wife Ellen Best Ash (who wrote a Personal Journal and a book called *Helpmeets*), are incorporated in the narrative to affirm both professional equality and acceptance of

one another as equals in love. Ellen Best Ash is earnestly researched by the dull Dr Beatrice Best who, ironically, initially wishes to research Ash's *Ask to Embla* for her doctoral dissertation. But as Adrienne Shiffman points out in her article titled "Burn What they Should Not See", "Beatrice's supervisor, Professor Bengt Bengtsson, assigns her a more 'suitable undertaking' – editing Ellen Ash's journal" (95). Shiffman continues: "Beatrice, the supposedly inadequate female scholar within a patriarchal institution, is offered the 'suitable' task of working with 'the inadequate female text'" (95-96). According to Shiffman, this perspective "devalues the female diary as a literary form" (96). Shiffman goes on to observe that Beatrice believes "Ellen Ash constructs her journal with a deliberate intention: to baffle", and that Beatrice sees beyond her "superficial dullness" (qtd. in Shiffman 96). I agree that, in fact, she refutes Ellen's "dullness" because she notes that Ellen "could have said something interesting – how shall I put it – intriguing – once in a while – but she *absolutely wasn't going to*" (Byatt 220). Byatt's feminist intimation is evident through the use of the italics in the last phrase of the sentence where she highlights the deliberate decision on the part of Ellen to refrain from writing anything "interesting". This indicates her intelligence and astuteness, as she is deliberately constructing a text with a specific agenda in mind, namely, her subtle protest through deliberate silence, and she is fully aware that her diary will possibly enter the public domain where her protest will be accessed. Here, the authorial voice is evident through her fictional biographer or diarist, as Ellen Ash is herself constructing her own fictional narrative to negate the patriarchy of her milieu. Shiffman states,

> Beatrice's certainty that Ellen "absolutely wasn't going to" reveal anything "intriguing" suggests an intentional orchestration on behalf of the diarist; her perfected, feminine domesticity is exposed as a deliberately manufactured and, hence, fictional construct. Ellen's careful process of selection and omission in the design of her journal illustrates

> her familiarity with the cultural ideology of separate gendered spheres as well as her subversive deconstruction of it. (97)

The witty insertion of this feminist protest is authorial, and the fictional biographer's role is the deliberate construct furthering Byatt's metafictional intent. Thus, the critique of the Victorian, and by implication current male, assumption that women are "the weaker sex", is emphasised. Ellen further demonstrates the shortcomings of patriarchal assumptions in her reading of Christabel LaMotte's poetry, clearly proving Ellen is not weak at all. Shiffman suggests that "[Ellen] places herself instead in the position of a learned literary critic, astutely sensitive to poetic talent" (98).

Shiffman points out in her article that Ellen's "systematic omission" is evident throughout her journals. When she writes about the perfect love she shares with Ash, she crosses out the words "Despite all". Shiffman suggests that "the crossed-out words essentially suggest an act of self-editing on the part of the diarist in order to create the fiction of the perfect marriage" (99). Ellen's refusal to display any emotion at the thought of her husband's infidelity reinforce the latter. She only states that "that matter is now closed" and adds, "I hope quite at an end and wholly cleared up" (Byatt 231). Ellen subverts any misogynist expectations of the weaker sex's hysteria.

Byatt allows the lack of sexual contact between Ash and Ellen to signify perhaps the ultimate denial of the masculine definition of the woman's role in heterosexual relationships namely the rightful claims the husband would expect regarding sexual intimacy from his spouse. Thus, when the feminine can define itself even in the absence of the masculine, it is thereby suggesting that Byatt is refuting the binaries that patriarchy depends on for its power and relevance. Shiffman highlights the latter by indicating that "Ellen's autonomous self – 'Herself' – exists in this gap" (100), and she goes on to show how Ellen debunks Luce Irigaray's controversial comment that "women exist in a simultaneous state of 'lack' and 'desire'; women do not have but

desperately want the male penis, the only sexual organ of recognised value in a phallocentric system" (23). Ellen does so through disrupting the phallocentric order when she refuses sexual penetration. Her vagina "is a site of subversion of the dominant patriarchal discourse" (Shiffman 101), as Ellen expresses in one of her poems:

> A thin, white animal, herself, trembling.
> A complex thing, the naked male, curly hairs and shining wet, at once bovine and dolphin-like, its scent feral and overwhelming.
> A large hand, held out in kindness, not once but many times, slapped away, pushed away. Slapped away.
> A running creature, crouching and cowering in the corner of the room, its teeth chattering, its veins clamped in spasms, its breath shallow and fluttering. Herself. (Byatt 459)

The above description of the unconsummated marriage becomes indicative of the female-self avoiding male dominance. This is emphasised using syntax, through placing "Herself" on its own within the last line of the quote. Thus, despite her initial fears, Ellen is ultimately completely in control, or in "possession", of herself.

The suggestion is that Ellen, without negating the sincerity of the love she feels for her husband, is not afraid of challenging the phallocentric assumption that a woman cannot exist as a "separate sphere", thus potentially tarnishing her feminine status. It is in this way that Byatt subtly and unobtrusively inserts her political voice. Rather, she allows Ellen to speak and write. As Shiffman reiterates, "Ellen in fact rewrites her position as wife in the discourse of marriage" (106). Thus, Byatt weaves a complex pattern of a different view of the role of the feminine, assisted by her biographer, who ensures that Ellen's story is told, that her writing, produced in a patriarchal past, is considered with seriousness within a patriarchal present. It is indeed through Ellen's

writing (and that of Ash and Christabel LaMotte) that Byatt undermines the "I" of her authorial hold on the novel. By adding another layer of writing to the text, we are poised to read such text as the thoughts of another being whose metaphysical difference from the author is marked by the character's writing itself. In other words, if the main way we identify Byatt as a singular mind is through her writing, then affording her characters the same medium of expression invites us to identify their individuality by the same means. They become independent from the hand of the author whose novel we read.

Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell, the text's other present-day lovers, are both highly qualified in their respective fields. Their equally passionate research into the past lives of LaMotte and Ash draws them together as prospective lovers. Byatt seems to question established gender roles through the novel's many researchers and their sexual orientation, especially given the interest in LaMotte (a woman poet), Blanche Glover's covert lesbian relationship, and the bisexual Professor Leonora Stern. However, Boccardi suggests that "the normative heterosexual relationships of Ash and LaMotte, Roland and Maud are invested with power that is denied to the attempts to affirm an alternate homosexual identity by the inarticulate Blanche Glover or the comically formidable Professor Stern" (69-70). Similarly, in an article titled "What's Love Got to Do with It?", Jackie Buxton suggests that,

> while Maud and Roland exhibit a scholarly postmodernist sensibility, the text itself exhibits a strong suspicion of that epistemic condition, even a condemnation of it. For all its postmodern gestures, *Possession* is first and foremost a straight narrative, a realistic fiction…. Byatt's allegiance in the novel is not with its contemporary time frame but with the Victorian past, of which the modern characters are in awe and whose moral and social solidity they envy…. [I]t is hardly a subversive text; indeed, its ideology is a heterosexual, humanist one. (151)

Postmodern elements abound in both of A.S. Byatt's novels in this study. However, the use of these elements is often a form of playfulness in order covertly to critique some of the stereotypical characteristics of Postmodernism in the realist novel, in *Possession* though, it seems, some might argue at the expense of prioritising heteronormativity. This poses the question as to what exactly Byatt is exploring here. There are concerted moments of feminism throughout the text, yet the two couples with whom we spend most of our time, the two couples who demand most of our attention and sympathies, are, indeed, quite conventionally heteronormative. The portrayal of some women in the text, particularly queer women, also warrants further sensitive investigation.

According to Carina Hart, "because men are the socially dominant gender, their gaze has the executive power of approval or change" (213). This means females do not have the power to influence societal change in a predominantly patriarchal domain. Hart states that Irigaray argues that many societies have been conditioned to believe that even the "female physical appearance has been constructed with male desires and demands in mind" (213). Hart continues: "Byatt's mistrust of French feminist theory is evident in her parodic treatment of Leonora Stern; Christien Franken claims that Leonora's character provides a vehicle for Byatt specifically to specifically 'ridicule' these ideas of Irigaray (213). Leonora's "female gaze", a concern of Irigaray's, is so overpowering that Leonora reduces Maud to tears when she attempts to seduce her. The openly queer woman of colour is used by Byatt to parody typical overt sexuality in the face of queerphobic stereotyping. Ironically, Leonora fails to entice Professor Blackadder to her room. Blackadder's rejection of her advances may suggest his preference for the Victorian obsession with the idea of separate male and female spheres. Thus, in Byatt's view, not much seems to have changed between the two eras. Male patriarchy still seems to be dominant. Perhaps Professor Blackadder subconsciously has an antipathy towards lesbianism or the idea of bisexuality. We see

that even though Byatt uses Leonora to demonstrate her suspicions of French feminist theory, the author remains sympathetic to the marginality of queer experiences.

Gender empowerment and disempowerment as is present in *Possession* is analysed by Carina Hart in her article titled “Glass Beauty: Coffins and Corpses in A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*”. Hart focuses on how “Byatt’s narrative also undermines the assertion that the male gaze corresponds to power because Roland is systematically disempowered in Maud’s presence” (213), having to admit that “he needs to cut their research short in order to catch a train home – he cannot afford to stay in a hotel – Roland is pressed to stay in Maud’s flat” (213). However, he does ostensibly regain his dignity and independence by the end of the novel through his numerous job offers and his love for Maud being reciprocated on equal intellectual grounds. Of course, this itself begs the question as to whether we are not still trapped in the preconceived stereotypical demands of a world determined by the roles assigned to separate gender spheres. After all, why should Roland have felt inferior in the first place? As Hart notes, “it would be too simplistic to read Roland’s position as a reversal of gender roles” (213). The premise of Roland’s discomfort is that he needs to be in a position to provide for Maud, which possibly informs his sense of inferiority. In the 1980s postmodern world, the feminist view deconstructs the patriarchy of the set cultural norms to release the individual from past accepted stereotypes, irrespective of whether the individual is man or woman. Yet it seems that, as in the case of Professor Blackadder, Roland, to a somewhat lesser degree, bears traces of Victorian patriarchy, albeit passively, directed internally and expressed as self-critique. Maud is willing to accommodate Roland in the scene mentioned above, yet it is Roland who feels shame in these circumstances. Byatt’s women are far more aware of gendered constructs society imposes on women and men, whether in Victorian England or in their contemporary (post)modern milieu. Byatt’s men still need to catch up. This is especially true in matters of love.

Roland's passion for Ash, and Maud's passion for LaMotte allow for the two academics to connect intellectually. In this case, the economic differences between them seem not to matter when they discuss their professional passions. True to the postmodern mould, Maud and Roland are sceptical of love at first and philosophise about their reservations in this regard. Maud tells Roland, regarding Ash and LaMotte, that she has been "trying to imagine him. Them" (266). She also says,

> We never say the word Love, do we – we know it's a suspect ideological construct – especially Romantic Love – so we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing in these things – Love – themselves – that what they did mattered. (267)

The two go on to discuss their disillusionment with how they are "made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things" (267) and both desire "to have nothing", to "desire nothing. An empty bed in an empty room. White" (267). Yet they feel drawn to each other as, at least in this moment, they fight against concerns of gender and status. In the aforementioned conversation between Maud and Roland, Maud quotes LaMotte: "Outside our small safe place flies Mystery" (267). Roland's and Maud's developing love for each other echoes that of their erstwhile poetic subjects. This kind of romantic doubling is echoed also in the (sometimes unidirectional) attractions felt between Blanche Glover and Christabel LaMotte and Professor Leonora Stern and Maud Bailey. Queer attraction is never becomes fulfilled in the novel, especially when compared to heterosexual attraction. Leonora Stern's advances are not reciprocated by Maud Bailey, and reference is made to Blanche Glover's suicide as a result of her perception of having lost Christabel LaMotte to Randolph Henry Ash. Queer love continues to flourish in the present age, Byatt seems to suggest, and heteronormative love continues to enjoy (to some extent) the freedoms it was granted (at least) more than a century ago. Byatt begins to use the traces of Victorian social norms more productively (more seductively) in the case of the attraction between Maud and

Roland. We have witnessed how misogyny weaves its way from the 1850s to the 1980s and 1990s, but romantic courtship has done the same, albeit figured somewhat differently. Inspired by their studies, the biographers begins to echo the behaviours of their biographical subjects – they are possessed (in the spiritual sense, as well as in others) by their subjects. The biographers begin to live by the texts of their academic interest.

Mary Kaiser points out in her review of *The Biographer's Tale* in *World Literature Today* that "references to a variety of texts that provide a context for another text" (145) are clear in *Possession*, which shows Byatt's incorporation of intertextuality: 40 percent of the novel consists of texts in the form of letters between numerous characters, academic writing of Leonora Stern, quotations from Cropper's autobiography of Randolph Henry Ash, the diary entries of Crabb Robinson, and the many journal entries of Ellen Ash, Blanche Glover, and Sabine de Kercoz. At the heart of all the writing in its various forms is the central concern with truth, or literary truth which is also the central concern of the figures of the fictional biographers in the novel.

In "The New Biography", Woolf wittily states that "in the first twenty years of the new century biographies must have lost half their weight." She continues that these new biographies are:

> an outward token of an inner change… the author's relation to his subject is different. He is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal… He chooses; he synthesizes; in short, he has ceased to be a chronicler; he has become an artist. (152)

The overlap and influence of past and present is apparent in *Possession*. Victorian norms and constructs have found their way into the present, and biographers literalise these traces by mimicking their subjects. Byatt constructs fictional biographer-researchers in a fictional world to develop and sell her ideas on the fiction necessary to highlight the facts – in this case it is the facts of how we construct our personalities, our selves, in relation that those who have come before. *Possession* shows that this influence is textual. The form of diary entries and letters succeeds in conveying the idea of truth effectively, as does the inclusion of an omniscient third-person narrator who Irene Martyniuk suggests is "trustworthy" and "a reliable source" (273). She goes on to say that "this narrator is specifically present to give information, that is, hard truth to the reader" (273). Irene Martyniuk clarifies "truth" in the following statement: "The era of postmodern narrative is one in which truth is revealed as unknowable; reality is ludic, and the game of fiction can be played in infinite ways" (265). According to Martyniuk, Byatt believes "in the constant quest to find hard truth, even knowing it is ultimately unavailable" (265). She goes on to suggest that "hard truth" for Byatt means "known, provable facts" (268) and that she is concerned with "notions of truth in history" (268).

In the novel, the scholars undertake a quest to find out the truth about the relationship between Ash and LaMotte. The opening pages of the novel initiate the search for truth. Roland needs to establish whom the great poet was addressing in the two drafts he finds in "Ash's own copy of Vico's *Principj di Scienza Nuova*" (2). The truth being pursued is fictional, and the hard facts which are known and provable form the essence of a fictional quest construct. Byatt makes this clear when, finally, the characters read LaMotte's final letter literally taken from Ash's grave, which results in their believing Ash did not know about their lovechild's survival, this suggests the literary truth of the novel.

Alongside the text's academic biographers are the life writers of a different kind. Ellen Ash becomes a fictional (auto)biographer in the diarist sense, and through her journal writing Byatt is able to expound her feminist beliefs as well as her apprehensions of truth. Though it is apparent that, even in her diary, Ellen fashions a certain kind of truth by which to live, exercised mainly through the evasion of truth. In her diary, Ellen deliberately withholds the truth about what she is told by Blanche Glover regarding Ash and LaMotte's indiscretion. After brushing off the information she has been given, she then writes that "A Poet is not a Divine being, with an angelic vision. Randolph has always denied that description" (231). Very tellingly, she then mentions how "Henry Baulk came and spoke with great kindness to Bertha…" and ends off metaphorically with "We played chess. I won" (231). There appears to be a subconscious link between the Blanche Glover visit and Bertha leaving because of her condition. By implication, it would seem she had been impregnated by Randolph Ash. Ellen in her next entry is incapacitated to the extent that she feels "almost as Snow White lay maybe, in the glass casket…" (232). This suggests she is devastated by the news she has had to hear, but, for the sake of Ash's privacy she does not blatantly describe in her journal exactly what transpires. Not only does this suggest that this truth is too painful to verbalise, but it also suggests that Ellen is conscious of her diary eventually being of public interest and thus she is careful to edit her writing – she thereby compromises hard truth (literary truth) for the sake of preserving the pristine image of her poet-husband's integrity and their "perfect" marriage which she will not allow to be disturbed even by the most devastating news.

Adrienne Shiffman points out that "for Ellen, however, a gap in her text is the locus of meaning" (100). Thus, Ellen, through her tampering with truth by forcing it into "systematic omission" (100) becomes in a sense a harbinger of truth itself because she subconsciously leaves just enough clues to inspire unwittingly the biographers/researchers to continue in their own quest to establish what they believe to be true. Ellen's diaries are writerly in the sense that Barthes meant it; they are set

up such that a reader must necessarily intervene to establish meaningful connections and, in a sense, "create" the truth that is only ever suggested by Ellen. Ellen is quite aware of the differences between a "public" persona and a "private" persona. Yet as Beatrice Best notes, she does "baffle" her researchers, which seems to be a deliberate ploy to allow the "hard truth" to unfold. The "hard truth" is something which she herself wanted nothing to do with at the time, namely Bertha's pregnancy and Ash's possible paternity or being the father of her child, and Ash's affair with LaMotte, which resulted in their daughter Maia. Ellen writes towards several kinds of truth in her diary, but these truths are obscured by way of oblique and deliberate omission: the truth of her husband; the truth of how a public figure is perceived; the truth of patriarchal culture; and the truth of her own feelings and attitudes towards all of these difficult circumstances. Not only is it the lie of fiction that reveals these truths, but it is also the lie within the lie that shows that. It is up to the reader to navigate these lies within lies to come eventually to some semblance of truth.

Regina Rudaityté suggests in her article titled "(De)Construction of the Postmodern in A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession*" that

> There is a desire for truth, for "knowledge" for the origins, a need for answers inscribed in the text, which *per se* contradict postmodern thinking…. The literary parody in *Possession* articulates the questions that postmodernism has rejected as realist: coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable. (122)

Rudaityté shows that Byatt's desire for a kind of truth is paramount to the success of the true romance, yet it contradicts the basic tenets of postmodernism, which uphold true fragmentation, randomness, indeterminacy and a suspicion of true meaning to be found in history and fiction. Rudaityté states that "this postmodern move eventually

results in a critique and deconstruction of postmodernism itself. Byatt's parody is also directed at the modern literary critical theories, particularly poststructuralism and feminist criticism" (116). In some instances, the novel does seem to attest to fragmentation, being made up of multiple stylistic forms of narrative, such as prose, letters, poetry, diary and journal entries. These suggest the basic contentions of the postmodern world, by combining different genres and registers. Yet, indeed, the novel goes further to negate randomness and indeterminacy by highlighting, through this romantic quest that drives several of the fictional scholars, the biographers' aim to attain the "truth" regarding Ash and LaMotte. This clearly indicates how Byatt critiques the flaws associated with the fragmentation of postmodernism through using its very framework as a springboard for her exposition, reiterating the value of historical continuity and the metaphysical concept of love being a truth, Byatt resists her own mode of representation; resists being possessed by it, choosing to, in some respects, transcend it.

Possession, the title of the novel, is used in several connotative ways. The various researchers wish to possess the Ash information for either genuine scholarly enrichment, selfish acquisitiveness, or even pecuniary reasons, as in the case of the owners of some Ash papers. The question arises as to whether these researchers can possess the information of their subject or whether in truth they are possessed by the subject.

Robert E. Heilman indicates in his article titled "A.S. Byatt's *Possession* Observed", that,

> In a premarital letter to his fiancée, Ash writes that his "most ardent desire is to be possessed entirely by the pure thought of you." He continues, Roland Mitchell, the researcher who stole a found manuscript in the form of a draft letter by Ash to an unknown woman, which

> inaugurated the research battles among the various scholars working on LaMotte and Ash, describes himself as "possessed" with the problem of their relationship. Later he tells Maud Bailey, his fellow researcher, and in time lover, of his total "possession with her." She complains that a woman like herself, regarded as beautiful, is often treated as "a kind of possession". (610)

We read later, regarding Maud, that Roland finally takes "possession of all her white coolness" (Byatt 507). Here, of course, Byatt's voice is conveyed through her fictional researcher or would-be biographer, Maud Bailey, who critiques the patriarchal view of women as decorative pieces rather than fully capable intellectual equals of the opposite sex. Byatt is concerned with the negative implications of the traditional requirements of women who are either consciously or subconsciously concerned with how they appear to the male gaze, how they are "possessed" through looking and social expectation. Maud is aware of the kind of misogynistic possession to which she is susceptible, and deflects it. This is only one kind of possession the characters and readers are meant to navigate. Throughout the narrative as readers we are aware of the question of who "will gain possession of the letters that research has dug up" (Heilman 609-610). Thus, in a sense, even the reader is possessed by the desire for knowledge or truth.

All the researchers are possessed of the need to establish the truth about the affair that seemed to exist between the objects of their academic interest. Roland Mitchell offers his apology for withholding the Ash correspondence to the "Dear Madam" by admitting "I was possessed I had to know" (Byatt 486). Possession implies one cannot possess a piece of something, only the whole. Possession can never accommodate sharing. (It is perhaps this aspect of possession that Maud resists.) The obsessive urge to possess (solely) is also evident in Mortimer Cropper's mania to own actual material objects of his hero and his spouse, be it Ash's gold watch or Ellen's jet brooch,

and his being prepared to grave-rob to this end highlights the intensity of the "possession" involved. Even Blackadder, the novel's villain, attests to Mortimer being "an infuriating person and an unscrupulous operator" (479). At the end, in the raging storm, Cropper recovers the box from the grave to be intercepted by all the "possessed" scholars who must know the truth. Finally, in Cropper's room at the Inn they all huddle around the disinterred box which is opened to reveal its contents. The telling letter, the site of the "hard truth" from Christabel LaMotte to Randolph Ash, is opened by Cropper and read to all by Maud, to confirm the life of their lovechild. Through including her wedding photograph, she admits that their child "*is beautiful – and resembles, I like to think, both her parents*, neither of whom *she knows to be her parent*" (499). Thus, everyone hears the "truth" of the fictional narrative, and in a sense their quest for exactly this truth has been fulfilled. Yet by the end of the novel, the postscript adds another incredible truth to the tale these characters will never know, regarding Ash's knowledge and meeting with his daughter, Maia. The postscript tells us of Ash's knowledge of his daughter through their meeting in a field of flowers, and the exchange of a lock of her hair which he puts into his pocket watch (509), with the final letter in the box extricated from Ash's grave (498) – the researchers believe the lock of hair to have belonged to LaMotte. At the core of this detail lies the question of truth, which is cryptic in the sense that, first, it is buried, and second, that, although the evidence exists, the truth remains unknown to the characters who have been pursuing this truth. The author privileges the reader who, through the postscript, understands that the lock of hair in Ash's watch does not belong to LaMotte but rather to their daughter. Mariadele Boccardi carefully explores how the novel creates a "hierarchy of understanding, at whose summit is the reader who has consumed the romance of the novel on all levels" (75). She goes on to say, "the contemporary characters, just below him/her, are satisfied because they do not know that their knowledge is incomplete" (75). This implies that Byatt's main concern is her reader, and the metafictional element of her authorial voice being incorporated in the narrative as the explicating, omniscient narrator. The function of the fictional biographers who have no knowledge

of the postscript, then, is superseded by the authorial intervention as the third-person omniscient narrator, which is blatant in its positioning of the reader as the ultimate possessor of something that tends towards complete truth. Indeed, some things cannot be known completely, as the narrator informs us when introducing the postscript: “There are things that happen that leave no discernible trace…” (508). The information imparted in the postscript, then, is beyond the world of the biographers, and the romance of the unlikely ending in the postscript is beyond, too, the “real” world of the readers although, satisfactory. There are some truths, the narrator seems to suggest, that are inaccessible, elusive, cannot be possessed completely.

There is also self-possession – Maud expresses her reservations to her new beloved by mentioning how she resonates with Christabel LaMotte and “her self-possession, her autonomy. I don’t want to think of that going. You understand?” (506), she importunes Roland Mitchell who simply assures her that he loves her and says, “I wouldn’t threaten your autonomy” (507). Here Byatt clearly paves the way for two individuals to find a way to coexist without losing their individuality. In other words, they can be possessed through being dispossessed in a sense, thus retaining that degree of autonomy.

Other forms of possession occur connotatively or figuratively and are directly linked to the concept of truth – Blanche Glover is so possessed by Christabel LaMotte that she wishes to divulge her affair with Randolph Ash to his wife Ellen Ash urgently as “a matter of life and death” (230). The truth of the affair weighs so heavily upon Blanche that the reason she is desperate to share this information with Ellen is that it is directly linked to her hope that the truth will result in the return of Christabel to her, and thus will insure her life in other words, prevent her suicide. Ellen’s refusal to acknowledge the affair results in her death. Christabel is devastated by this and feels she has murdered Blanche when it transpires that she has committed suicide.

Randolph Ash is truthful and honestly confesses to Ellen, “For the last year perhaps I have been in love with another woman. I could say it was a sort of madness. A possession, as by daemons” (453). Randolph justifies his love for Christabel by externalising the cause, deflecting some of the blame from himself. Truth is compromised through this. Ellen surprises him by stating that she knew all along and provides ocular proof in the form of the poem “Swammerdam” which he had sent to LaMotte, which Blanche Glover had given to her as proof of the liaison. Byatt is careful to provide “hard truth” here to ensure that a full understanding of the matter is clear. There can be no escape from the truth for Randolph Ash or Ellen; both are possessed of the truth.

The solidity of this evidence is contrasted with the ethereal spiritual form of possession which is supposed to have occurred during the séance in which Christabel refers to herself as being a murderess and allows Randolph Ash to assume she killed their child, when she is actually thinking about the suicide of Blanche Glover, for which she believes she is responsible. It is in this section of the novel in which Byatt demonstrates how lies and their value are not always relative, how in some cases lies may be damaging. *Possession* may be understood as a novel-length argument by Byatt advocating that the value of lies in acquiring truth, especially truth about others and oneself reinforcing the value of fiction as a vehicle for the quest for truth whether real-life-truth or literary truth. However, what are understood as lies in this scene of the novel are damaging. Though Christabel refers to herself as a murderess, Randolph misconstrues the matter entirely. Christabel lies to herself; Randolph misreads the situation, and so lies to himself, too. Conducting the séance is Mrs Lees. A letter is cited by Cropper in which Christabel LaMotte explores the metaphysical by referring to the medium, Mrs Lees, and the metaphysical poet George Herbert. She attests to her own powers of “scrying” or being able “to see things” but Byatt has Cropper deliberately negate all her contentions by stating, through the omniscient third-person narrator, that “Cropper decided that this letter showed strong symptoms of

derangement" (389). Not all lies, Byatt seems to suggest, are valuable, productive, or worth consideration, or lead us to what is ultimately true. Some lies lead one astray, and perhaps even deflect from the truth of oneself.

When Christabel explains the truth of her feelings and care for their daughter in her final letter to Randolph when he is on his death bed, Ellen withholds the latter from him, withholds the truth, thereby possessing it. Ironically, it is through this letter that is buried with him that Byatt deliberately shares this information with her characters and her readers to create empathy for both poets, expounding the truth they were all seeking.

The novel's "Postscript 1868" begins with the following sentences by the omniscient natator:

> There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been.
>
> Two people met, on a hot May day, and never later mentioned their meeting. (508)

The extract suggests that some aspects of the past remain at their point of origin, and are therefore unknowable. Boccardi suggests that "the past is therefore granted existence in itself beyond the reach of the present", and therefore, "as the truth is progressively unveiled, the importance of the textual remains as physical entities circulating in the present recedes" (75). She goes on to emphasise that the reader is "romantically transported to the past". The postscript "[disrupts] the chronological sequence and [adds] the final twist in the story after its apparent conclusion at the end

of the novel" (75). The past(s), or at least "trace[s]" of it, are beyond study, beyond biographical rendering, and therefore beyond text.

This may suggest a moment of (postmodern) cynicism on Byatt's part. Yet I fully agree that "*Possession's* high-spirited response to past triumphs against the paralysis of Postmodern scepticism" results "in something positive where the postmodern consciousness is lacking" (Sanders 19). This new hope and the willingness or indeed the need of the reader to believe in a truth outside of themselves, believe in that which exists "beyond" the primary, postmodern story, is an encouraging and productive turn in Byatt's text. It is, once again, in how Byatt grants the reader an author-reader privilege that negates scepticism. The reader has more knowledge than many of the contemporary characters owing to the Postscript where Boccardi points out that "The meeting between Ash and his daughter is validated as having its reality and historicity enhanced by not having left a textual trace behind" (77). This is, of course, relative only to Maud, Blackadder, and so on, and not to the reader. Boccardi concludes that, "[Byatt] does so to express the very un-postmodern view that history in fact transcends its textual, documentary remains, even if those are necessarily the starting points for reconstructing and, more urgently, reimagining the past" (77). So, *Possession* shows that there are limitations to the strength of postmodernism. There are aspects of narrative that lie beyond its reach. This is despite the fact that Byatt's novel functions within a postmodern mode.

The novel, though clearly postmodern, relies heavily on Victorian and often realist aesthetics for its expression. However, these are incorporated in the text by way of pastiche, a key postmodern avenue of expression. There are imitations of Victorian poetry like, for example, the excerpt from Randolph Henry Ash's *The Garden of Proserpina* (1861), which introduces the first chapter and foreshadows the central theme of the novel: "These things are there. The garden and the tree / The serpent at its root, the fruit of gold / The woman in the shadow of the boughs" (3). Ash again

quotes from this poem in the Postscript. Embedded within each chapter are poetic lines by Ash or Christabel LaMotte, Shakespeare, or other famous metaphysical poets. Byatt sets Ash and LaMotte alongside real authors. LaMotte and Ash's poetry, therefore, are just as real, just as important and worthy of study. Poems do not only begin or end chapters but occur in conversations or in the letters of the characters. Only three chapters do not have poems in them: chapters 22, 23 and 24, which seem to be instances in which the plot's progression is a priority. Poetic intertextuality is therefore central to the metafictional narration, which further allows for the incorporation of myth and fairytales like "The Glass Coffin" and "The Fairy Melusine", which reflect the personalities of the protagonists, Ash and LaMotte, and Roland and Maud. We learn more of these characters through their fiction. Their personalities are textual.

The postmodern construct is vital as a basis for interrogating postmodern ideas through which Victorian sentiments are expressed. Victorian ideals and its sought-after values act both as a foil and catalyst for the modern era in which the parallel narrative operates with its postmodern concerns. The role that the fictional biographers and scholars play in the text is thus part of the construct necessary to inform the metafictional intent, typical of Byatt's works in general.

In *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas G. Nanson states that

> One of the things I learned in these weeks about research was that the great makers constantly raided previous works – whether in pebble, or marble, or glass, or silver and gold – for tesserae which they rewrought into new images. (29)

Phineas seems to speak for all biographers in both *Possession* and *The Biographer's Tale*; both novels' biographers create their works (developing a narrative of their

subjects and themselves) through stitching together various texts. Both are proponents of what Michel Foucault speaks about in “What is an Author?” when he says that all texts are necessarily about the author, and are composites of other texts. Both texts are postmodern through and through, yet are also suspicious of its tenets, sometimes using these postmodern principles to critique postmodernity.

By Phineas’ words above, Byatt is playing within postmodernity, showing how a text is never original, for she is demonstrating how, through intertextuality, any semblance of assumed originality lies in the recycling of the ideas into “new images” (29) and texts become beautiful in their “new contexts” (29). Much the same happens to the central characters in *The Biographer’s Tale* and *Possession*. The biographers in these stories come to construct and reconstruct their identities by incorporating different selves (sometimes their biographical subjects) into a new version of themselves. Byatt’s final claim, then, at least as far as these two novels are concerned, is that we are not stuck in a postmodern hall of mirrors, but are able to, first, recognise the kinds of texts that have come before, and second, produce something unique in their mixing.

Chapter 5: Patrick Flanery

Absolution by Patrick Flanery focuses on the writing of the biography of the (fictional) famous South African author, Clare Wald. The fictional biographer in this novel is the academic Sam Leroux, who has been commissioned at her request. Sam returns to post-apartheid South Africa after an academic sojourn in the United States and finds himself feeling neither a foreigner nor a local. His relationship with Clare Wald is fraught with difficulty at first, because Clare is reticent and seems to be hiding their past connection. She confronts her past demons in her quest for absolution, the latter being the central concern of the novel. *Absolution*, the title of the novel, is also the title of Clare's latest book. This novel-within-the-novel enhances the central concern of the narrative – the striving towards absolution through attempting to engage with "truth" through various textual modes of representation. These two characters' lives, it becomes clear, were historically caught up in the political tragedies of their apartheid past and they both need to come to grips with the unspeakable violence each protagonist feels he or she was responsible for at the time. The novel is fragmented into four distinct narrative voices, each denoting a specific point of view sequentially presented by the "Sam", "Absolution", "Clare", and 1989, 1989–98, 1998–99 and 1999 chapters, interspersed twice by transcripts from the TRC hearings which occur after the "Clare" chapters.

According to Patrick Flanery in a 2015 interview with *English Experience*, the structural complexity of the novel is a deliberate construct to animate "competing versions of the past held by the characters. It also works as a way of reflecting the fact that 'the truth', particularly in the late stages of apartheid [which] was itself complex and multi-layered" (7). However, each protagonist's recollection of truth appears to be imbued with a personal apprehension thereof, not only because of the complexity of the apartheid experience, but also the mnemonic distortion, or the unreliability of memory, brought about by childhood trauma.

Clare's trauma suffered as a child was the result of her sister Nora, who she felt tormented her. In the novel, she explains to her adult son, Mark, that

> My sister had nothing of that nurturing sense, or if she did, it was eclipsed by her rage at my usurping her position as the sole focus of our parents' attention that the only way she could respond to me was with resentment and hatred – resenting my coming and hating my being…. [T]he burnings and beatings, the trickery and abuse, the destruction of my most treasured books, her attempts to undermine my happy relations with our parents. (289)

She goes on to say her sister was "not just a terrorist, but [her] jailor and torturer, [her] own nursery sadist" (289). This quote reveals some of Clare's grievances against her sister. This leads her to question her motives for her imagining that she was responsible for the deaths Nora and her husband, who were both pro-apartheid operatives. She says that the two had been "in denial of the currents of history" (22), and states the following:

> I gave away Nora's location. I told someone who was not supposed to know where she and Stephan would be on a particular night. The information was used, and, as you know, they were murdered in their bed…. In retrospect it felt as much like a personal decision as a political one. Stephan was powerful and had the power to do great evil. In eliminating him, I felt as though I was striking a blow against the whole edifice of the apartheid state. Nora was collateral damage. (292)

Clare also explains to Mark that, when he was a baby, Nora had tried to win custody of Mark, "her darlingest" (311) as she was childless. The resentment and anger she

experienced may also have precipitated her telling some people at a Liberation meeting or possibly uMkhonto we Sizwe members where her sister was staying. Two days later, they were assassinated. Clare, the lauded storyteller, constructs for herself a story, sketching herself as a character whose motivations later in life are explained by events that happened decades before. There is an arc to the narrative that assumes a satisfying dramatic form. Clare's revenge is the kind that seems justified and without moral contradiction when read in fiction. However, the guilt she feels (as she explains it to her son) sets her apart from the narrative she has created and brings her into the very real circumstances she lives in. While the killing of her sister may have brought her resolution in the world of narrative, it does not afford her the same closure in "reality". This leads to her seeking some form of absolution. She turns to her lawyer son, who simply tells her that there is no evidence, and he states that "there can't be a trial where no crime has been committed. If anything, you're merely a gossip, and your gossiping resulted in the deaths of two people, at least one of whom was wholly innocent" (317).

"Gossip" is a word that has been used by almost all authors in this study. In all cases it has been used disparagingly, but Coetzee and Byatt suggest that there may be something productive in the word. They are not yet ready to brush off its potential value. In Flanery's case, in this scene, it is used to slightly different effect. Clare's appeal to her lawyer son demonstrates her need to seek resolution and absolution to her life story by way of appealing to recognisable structures within the state that will bring national recognition to the moral closure she seeks. Yet her son easily dismisses her story (and therefore her appeal) as one hinged on gossip, which describes the way (often tall) stories are transmitted from person to person. There is no national or state recognition that may be sought through gossip; there can be no formal or legal record of this confession, of this story. Clare's son bars her from the satisfaction of state-recognised absolution.

Clare's personal and political trauma results in a rejection of Laura's truth and Laura's reliance on her, her mother. And so Clare turns also to the form most familiar to her, written narrative, as a means of resolving her trauma, guilt, and accountability. She turns to Sam Leroux, her biographer, to give shape to her life. The kind of resolution and absolution she sought through law and the state is different to the more personal or narrativized closure that she may attain through the writing of her biography. She seeks absolution, which we may read as a moral validation of the truth she believes defines her life, in multiple ways.

At the Stellenbosch Festival (a fictional literary festival) she explains her "attempt at self-exorcism" (377) to Sam, "the boy at the door" (374), rather than Sam Leroux, her biographer – from the outset of their meeting she states categorically, "'What we need to say is not for note taking and audio recording. Do you agree?'" Sam responds, "'Yes. Today is not for the book'" (369). Clare, who selected Sam for the task, knows who Sam is from the beginning. Sam does not know that she knows. So, when Clare tells Sam facts about her life that are off the record, it reads as a private confession to one of the people in her life she hurt most. This is perhaps the third way in which Clare seeks absolution, from her biographer not as a biographer, but as a person directly implicated in the story she wishes to tell. This is the most intimate indication of her desire to confess and be absolved.

Clare tells Sam that what she did was "careless and selfish" (377), yet she finally admits this after telling Sam about her guilt:

> Do I know with certainty that the people to whom I spoke were responsible for transmitting the information I revealed about my sister and brother-in-law to the person or persons responsible for their assassination? No. (378)

She goes on to say she only has a "sense of [her] own involvement" (378). At this point in the narrative, the role of the fictional biographer takes on a serious aspect as he becomes a sounding board for engaging in the process of life-writing. He is reminded by Clare of Dostoevsky's statement that "a true autobiography is almost an impossibility, because it is in the nature of humans to lie to themselves" (qtd. in *Absolution* 378). This comment demonstrates the profundity of trying to establish what exactly "truth" is. Of the three ways Clare attempts to seek absolution, it may be that the biography is the method about which she harbours the most suspicion. It is also the method that most resembles her craft. We may assume that Clare, an accomplished author, is far too familiar with the narrative form and its reliance on lies to place any confidence in biography, another narrative form. She seeks recognition of her truth through other means, through people other than herself.

Sam is inextricably bound up in the life of the subject of his biography. On revealing his own childhood trauma to Clare regarding his assumption that he killed his abusive Uncle Bernard – in spite of having had a different memory of he and Laura doing it together – he thinks, "for the sake of Clare, not for mine… and for the sake of Laura's memory" and tells Clare "it was *my* foot on the accelerator… she didn't kill my uncle" (376). This is not the first time that Sam lies to Clare. He begins by lying by omission by not telling Clare who he is when they first meet, how they are connected from decades ago. (He, of course, does not know that she already knows who he is from the beginning.) In this scene, Sam, sympathetically, lies to Clare so that she may retain a favourable memory of her daughter. It is his (perceived) moral obligation that outweighs his obligation to truth. Several characters in the novel perform this delicate balance, weighing up truth (about themselves and others) against their ethical beliefs. Clare herself in her censorship role undertakes to censor one of her own books to validate her work for the questionable Censorship board during the apartheid era. Her justification of her actions was that she was "hoping to subvert the system from within"

(42). This weighing up of the truth about the self against ethical beliefs seems to be one of the author's core concerns.

In Patrick Flanery's interview with Christopher Holmes, Flanery speaks of his metafictional concerns and how he utilises the biographer's narrative to make observations about life-writing. Holmes asks Flanery about how the novel's various intertexts may be reads as "a very specific marker of anxieties over historical documentation in the years following the TRC. How do you see this document-suspicion operating in contemporary fiction broadly, and in *Absolution* specifically?" (441-442). Flanery answers:

> Throughout the process of writing and revision, the question I kept asking myself was, whose story is it to tell, and what are the ethics of any act of telling or representation…? … I always need a focalizer and feel most comfortable either with first person or free indirect discourse. (442)

It is clear that Sam and Clare both act as focalisers, or voices for the author's main concerns in the narrative through the sharing of their stories with each other. And it is truth that is among the novel's most signal preoccupations, with Flanery guided by the kinds of truth as they were defined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, namely "narrative, forensic, discursive or dialogic and restorative [truth]" (439). Clare attempts to find absolution through several of these kinds of truth, described earlier, though not by this framing. It is through her writing that Clare attempts to establish narrative truth; it is through her discussion with her son, the lawyer, that she attempts to establish forensic truth, with her son dismissing this attempt entirely by saying that nothing of what she believes she has done can be proven definitively; it is in her exchanges with Sam that she attempts but fails to establish discursive or dialogic truth (the interplay between forensic and narrative truth), this failure defined, in part,

because the bases of their discussion is defined by both parties' unwillingness to disclose their knowledge of who the other person is – they speak to each other as though they were abstraction, thus denying their shared histories, thereby avoiding personal responsibility.

Neither Sam nor Clare is able finally to gain restorative truth, which is "a form of resolution that does not actually occur in the book" as Flanery discloses in his interview (439). Neither character achieves "definitive closure", which is in keeping with Flanery's "refusal to resolve those compelling fragments, to bind the characters to a rigid ethics" (428). Holmes states that "Philip Gourevitch's laudatory review of *Absolution* in *The New Yorker* makes the point most directly: 'He brings the book's many stories together at last, but there is no pretence that they are over. Leaving them unresolved may be the most hopeful ending possible'" (qtd. by Holmes 429). This is a pertinent analysis of the rationale behind the revelations in each narrative: the striving towards absolution is in itself hopeful, even if it is not fully attained in the moral sense as the result of confession and repentance. As Holmes suggests:

> The novelist, the memoirist, the historian, and even the censor share a common responsibility and peril: when faced with the failure of narrative to adequately capture human events, an account must still be written, however fragile and incomplete. (428)

Clare's story needs to be told even if she has to call it a "fiction", and Sam needs to share his Bernard story and perhaps lies to find a form of closure even if it is incomplete.

Flanery's various intertexts in the novel are a working-through of these various kinds of truth, with different truths expressed in different modes. Clare hints at the necessity

of expressing different forms of truth within different voices (in a quote also cited by Holmes in his interview with Flanery):

> There are two things to say about that. First, that history is not always correct, because it cannot tell all the stories that have been, cannot account for everything that happened…. Second, even a flawed memory has its own kind of truth. (*Absolution* 377)

Clare relates this to Sam after he tells her about "the bodies in the truck, and the grave and Bernard's burial" (377). Apartheid and personal memory for both protagonists have become intertwined and are imperfect. The novel, then, may be read as different expressions or experiments with truth as characters work through different modes of truth within different modes of expression with characters in some instances speaking for themselves or deferring their voice to others.

The "Sam" chapters are written in the first person and show Sam's relationship with Clare, initially fraught with tension, progressively becoming more positive throughout the novel. It reflects his time in Cape Town – and concerns related to past apartheid realities – and his move to Johannesburg where, because he is partly South African and partly American, he has some emotional distance to provide some objective analysis of post-apartheid social interactions. Before they both disclose that they knew who the other was all along, we assume that Sam relies on his Americanness to justify his intimacy and proximity to Clare's life and her (post)apartheid South African context. It is not always easy, though, for Sam to identify as one or the other. At times, his dual national identities compete against each other. Sam says,

> Though it's only supposed to be our second meeting, Clare can't or won't see me today. Instead, I go to the Western Cape archives, park in Roeland Street, and nod at the car guard who is sheltering in the shade

> of a truck. He gives me a subservient smile and makes some kind of sound of assent. I find myself always on edge, expecting the worst. At the airport I was a foreigner, but a week later, in the market yesterday, I was already a local again. (9)

Sam straddles the duality of his nationality. Once he knows that Clare will not welcome him, he is free to do research at the government Archives where he goes on to indicate his insider-outsider status by describing his feeling of having become a local again after just one week back in South Africa. Yet there is also the negotiations around the duality of his professional and personal status. He is both biographer and protagonist of the life of his biographee. This passage reveals that Clare is initially difficult ("Clare can't or won't see me today"), which shows his subservience to her as her biographer.

The function of the first person in these chapters serves to provide the reader with the sense of a seemingly reliable exposé of events as they occur – not only regarding events around his relationship with his subject but also around his genuine concern regarding the post-apartheid reality of South Africa, including being made aware of previously disadvantaged people who still battle poverty on a daily basis. Although, the mere use of the first-person narrator does not mean necessarily that what is being narrated is of course wholly true, it may require careful consideration to establish the true reasons for the negativity encountered.

Regardless under which national identity Sam operates, fear seems to define his movement within South Africa: "I find myself always on edge, expecting the worst" (9). This becomes a haunting refrain as no less than ten incidents are mentioned involving beggars or the fear of a potential home invasion in the novel. Sam says, "I give the car guard what I think is proper. It always seems too little or too much. Later I ask Greg [Sam's long-time friend and host in the country] what he thinks" (10). Sam's voice and

anxieties are representative of a particular kind of (post)apartheid, middle-class white South African psyche.

Greg's response, fraught with patronising nuances, is a foil for the seeming sincerity of Sam's genuine concern. Greg explains to Sam how much he gives back through providing employment to several people and helps them by assisting them with funding for education and sundries, which indicates his white guilt. Greg also says that he gives food to "the old man because he is never drunk" (11). There are limits to his charity, which is also accompanied by moral judgement of those less privileged than he is. Greg's rationalises that he owes "them a little more" (11), thus styling his charity as a debt owed, rather than as a sincere desire to share his privileges with those less fortunate than himself. His excess generosity possibly speaks to his insecurity around his racial identity and the history that accompanies it.

Derek Hook suggests the following in his book titled *(Post)Apartheid Conditions: Psychoanalysis and Social Formation*: "We have thus a generation of a set of reliant and needy subjects, whose status as disempowered is affirmed in what we might refer to as 'the 'violence of charity'" (96). Hook goes on to emphasise Pumla Gqola's assertion that "help is the most potent form of exercising power" (96). Hook argues that doing good can be a form of humanitarian "violence". He points out, regarding the "giving something back discourse" (95), that "it makes for one of the dominant modes of a repentant whiteness today, one of the more habitable means of occupying a position of racialized privilege" (95). Thus, Greg is a questionable mouthpiece for middle-class white South Africans trying to atone for white guilt by "giving back".

There is a second beggar who is a seemingly destitute woman asking for 90 South African rands for shelter for the night. The degradation of (post)apartheid South Africa is brought into focus through the dispassionate alms offered when it is a meaningless amount to the donor. Sam states, "Fifteen or twenty rand is nothing to me – less than

five dollars, less than four" (69). This again is a way of the author's reiterating the inadequate attempt to redress the wrongs of apartheid through charity using the fictional biographer as main proponent of the latter.

Later, Sam and Greg are eating ice creams and are confronted by two ten-year-old boy beggars and Greg says, "They're saying, *Mister, mister, please we want some of what you have*" (100). Greg, after justifying why he will not oblige them, decides they must leave "when the boys begin to approach, more brazen" (100). Then, ironically, when they are preparing supper at home there is another beggar at the door. Greg shows his paranoia when he explains to Sam that "he's checking to see if anyone's here" and goes on to explain a colleague's narrow escape from a rape attack because the police came just in time: "she had a panic button wired into the bed frame" (101). The reality of crime of (post)apartheid South Africa is seriously penned to highlight the effect it has on the middle-class white community.

Lastly, Sam assists a beggar named Derek, who he saw going through a garbage bin, but there is no indication of what Derek might be internalising. Perhaps the author, through saying little, says much – because of the unique experiences of this biographer, a deliberate construct on the part of the author, the complexity of being white in South Africa is brought to the fore. Owing to the legacy of apartheid, poverty and race seem to be indicative of a larger South African collective psyche, of which he is intrinsically aware. This psyche expresses itself sometimes as fear as can be seen when Greg's house alarm goes off and an intruder is caught – the same man who came while they were preparing supper. Greg concludes he will need to move into a gated community. When Sam fetches his wife, Sarah, from the airport he is confronted by a deaf beggar and then when they go to a restaurant, they are confronted by an Afrikaans beggar who demands 100 South African rands and becomes angry when they refuse. When he is waiting for Sarah at the airport, enjoying a cup of coffee and a muffin, he is accosted by a dishevelled beggar who is disappointed with the five-rand

coin Sam gives him. At this point, he feels a “surge of irritation” and then he says, “I am outraged, and then become outraged at my own outrage” (202).

Throughout the novel, Sam is offering a commentary on the social idiosyncrasies of a country fraught with extreme poverty juxtaposed with extreme wealth, and this seems to suggest that Sam – who is meant to be impartial owing to his “insider-outsider” status – cannot be removed from the contradictions evident in the “new” South Africa. Furthermore, these minor disturbing events lead up to the murder of Sam’s aunt later in the novel, indicating the horror of the reality of (post)apartheid South Africa. With each encounter with a beggar, Sam exhibits a range of emotional responses, beginning with his uncertainties about how to navigate a territory from which he has been removed for some time, recognising his own privilege (extreme by comparison) against those who have nothing, and then experiencing fear when his life and the lives of those he loves are threatened.

These extreme discrepancies in the new South Africa clearly point to matters that have gone unresolved: stories, tragedies, and injustices that have not yet been narrated or acknowledged, albeit in the form of some kind of confession either publicly as in the TRC forum, or privately as the involvement of the biographer with his subject. This is necessary for all to move towards absolution even though it is not possible to obtain the same completely in the worldly sense. It is also for this reason that I have used parentheses around the “post” of “(post)apartheid”, copied from Hook and justified in the same way. Hook’s parentheses suggest that apartheid has not been entirely done away with, where state-sanctioned, legislative racism has been formally eradicated, but the traces of racial and economic disparity instigated by apartheid are still felt within the present.

At the centre of this (continued) disparity (at least as concerns the novel) is Sam. Part of how he attempts to make sense of this strange land is through telling his story in his

own voice, perhaps part of what marks his privilege. It is in these sections (the “Sam” chapters) in which Sam adopts the role of the autobiographer. This is of course accompanied by his role as biographer, though, because his story is so tangled up with his biographical subject, it becomes impossible to know in what capacity he speaks at which points. Again, Flanery’s reluctance at providing a moral resolution for his characters is echoed in the entanglement of their voices and modes of expression. The methods and modes through which the characters attempt to resolve their moral uncertainty is obscured, too.

So, Sam becomes a vehicle for querying life-writing. Michael Titlestad, in his *Mail and Guardian* review of *Absolution* in 2012 reiterates this as he states that “we feel increasingly that there are important questions at stake. They interrogate not only the relation between characters and their representations of themselves, but also the complex connection between fiction and reality” (8). This comment suggests that the question of truth and its place within the fictional construct is under discussion and the value of this mode of fictional exposition and its reflection of societal and human realities is pivotal because of its metafictional experimentational implications.

The rest of the “Sam” chapters develop the relationship between Clare and Sam. The careful construct of dialogue interspersed with Sam’s personal comments directed at the reader is akin to breaking the fourth wall in film. Bearing in mind Patrick Flanery’s filmic background, his fictional biographer enhances specific cinematographically drawn incidents in the narrative, thereby graphically reflecting specific themes. On the first page of the novel, Sam “tells” the reader that, despite Clare remembering meeting him in London, “it wasn’t London but Amsterdam where [he] spoke as a promising young expert on her work” and that he did not ever meet her in London. He then adds pointedly on a separate line, “There was the other time, too, of course” (3). These words are not meant for Clare’s ears but for the eyes of the reader only, thus subtly breaking the fourth wall to some extent. This is a clever device to position the reader

positively towards Sam's depiction of truth. And, with Sam writing towards an assumed reader, he ensures that his story is heard and therefore also validated: he is not speaking into an echo chamber, having his words speak back on themselves. The comment about "the other time" immediately creates a sense of mystery, and suggests, of course, that there is more to Sam's connection to his subject. It also shows how aware Sam is of the reader's presence: he knows what kind of information to dispense, and when.

Flanery himself admits that his interest in the cinematic informs his writing. In the Holmes interview, when he was asked about the "cinematic" as a stylistic preoccupation, (and it is relevant regarding the search for truth which ultimately is the all-encompassing literary truth) he answered:

> As I write, I see characters, setting, and action cinematically and am always now thinking about where the narrative "camera" is placed, what is visible, to which characters' thoughts I and the reader will have access, and what "angles" and "close-ups," so to speak, will bring the scene most vividly to life. (440-441)

Flanery's desire to bring the scene "vividly to life" is apparent when Clare states, "I have no memory of your face. Not of your voice. That accent. I don't think we could possibly have met. Not in this lifetime as they say" (3). Here, the scene is set clearly reflecting Clare's character, and it will transpire that Clare is being dishonest at this point – by the end of the "Sam" chapters when Clare is doing a reading of her novel *Absolution* at a literary festival, she gives him the diary she wrote to Laura and in it she declares, "Of course I remembered him at once. Not just here. I knew him immediately in Amsterdam…. *What does he want?* I ask*. Why can he not say what he has come to say?*" (344). She admits her deliberate duplicity, and then she invites Sam, on the final

page of the diary to “come back tomorrow afternoon and say what you failed to say in Cape Town. Let us say what we both know is between us” (344).

The role of the fictional biographer in this novel goes beyond life-writing. Sam becomes the orchestrator of more than one narrative (where the first narrative sets the scene for a second narrative in which a space for both protagonists is proffered to acknowledge the past traumas each have experienced). One can only read them alongside each other. Indeed, this is the way Flanery has set up the text, as each narrator is given a chapter to carry the narrative. As such, the information (opinions, narrative threads, omissions) Sam provides in one part of the narrative speaks to how we receive the information in the next part of the narrative.

Ultimately, truth as a major theme is conveyed throughout the “Sam” chapters. Sam is seemingly trustworthy as a narrator, not hesitant to divulge information to his reader, and alerts us to the times when he is withholding information from others, especially Clare. Sam undertakes to establish what happened to Laura for Clare’s sake as much as for his own, by making contact with her associates from the past, Lionel and Timothy. Sam realises from their conversation that “Laura was on the wrong side of history” and that she was an “embarrassment” and “no-one wanted to talk about her (304). The thought that Laura was not an anti-apartheid activist but rather a double agent was devastating for Sam, who had to accept the possibility that she sabotaged his parents. He states, “Laura was supposed to be a friend of my parents and all that time she was deceiving them” (305). It is through Sam that truth is tested, for it is he who establishes what Laura’s real agenda was.

Clare, however, is unaware of how Laura is implicated in Sam’s life, especially unaware of what a damaging force she was in Sam’s history. Yet she does know something. Clare admits to Sam that it was she who machinated his being chosen to write her biography. She states:

> You're here because of who you are, because of your place in my family, or the place that I denied you in my family. You're here also because I hoped you might know something more about my daughter in the days before she disappeared. Let us be honest about that at least. (371)

Sam feels his "legs begin to wobble" and he thinks,

> I know I can never tell her what I learned from Timothy and Lionel. Whatever she may or may not guess about Laura, to tell her what I now believe to be true would, I fear, destroy her. Despite whatever lingering resentment I may feel about the past, the last thing I want to do is hurt her. (371)

Sam withholds the information on Laura based on ethical grounds. Some truth he inadvertently reveals is his character. We know from this that Sam's compassion outweighs his commitment to divulging the truth. He is not interested in truth for truth's sake; the truth he wishes to express (or omit) are truths that he perceives are for the greater good, especially, in this case, for someone, Clare, he perceives as his mother: he yearned for her maternal care even after she rejected him on her doorstep. Sam obscures the truth for the benefit of the kind of story he wishes to tell Clare (a story that is in part about Clare). The facts of the matter seem to digress from the kind of narrative arc he wishes to construct. Truth, for Sam, ought to be expressed for that which is ethically sound.

Historically and politically, Clare's and Sam's major concern is their connection to apartheid sites of memory and the personal connection they share because of their mutual relationship with Laura and the fear of what might have happened to her

regarding her disappearance. This recalls Titlestad's comment about questioning the complex connection between fiction and reality. Flanery deftly links the two.

The "Absolution" chapters follow the "Sam" chapters. Through using the third-person narrative in her new book, *Absolution,* Clare deliberately distances herself as the author, providing a platform for her to explore her past objectively as these events occur before she begins her interviews with Sam. She describes her home invasion in Canigou Avenue, the disappearance of her father's barrister's wig, and the subsequent racially charged interrogation by the policewoman, Ms White. The latter results in Clare's reluctant move into a secure estate in Bishopscourt, where one night she confesses her guilt regarding the assassination of her sister and brother-in-law to her son. Clare writes in her novel, "She was hyperventilating when she woke, and her heart was beating so loudly that if anyone had been in the room it would have betrayed her…. But she *could* smell him and the metallic reek of the gun" (17). Clare's use of the third-person distances herself from a narrative she has essentially lived through.

Patrick Flaner suggests that this distance allows the reader "a detached look into her life" (The English Experience 9). Clare declares about her book, "'It's only fiction after all,' I told him turning over the book to point to the label on the back, just above the barcode. 'Language makes the world around us, and all we encounter. If I call it fiction, then fiction it is'" (382). Calling her book "fiction" affords Clare the space to evade uncomfortable truths in her own perception of the past and what she would believe happened to Laura. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that she is not completely truthful precisely because she bears the guilt of her past, by her own admittance her being a bad mother to Laura and her enormous guilt regarding her belief that she was responsible for her sister and brother-in-law's deaths emphasises the reasons for her distancing herself from absolute truth. However, the distance she grants herself offers no solace, and does not foster the kind of objectivity that would be assumed of the use of the third-person. Indeed, Clare, in a later "Clare" chapter, insists that "the new book,

Absolution, [is] a volume of fictionalised memoirs" (138). The reader cannot accept these excerpts from her novel as absolute truth.

Clare vacillates throughout the novel about how to express the truth of her life, the truth of her daughter and what she did or did not do to her. When discussing her novel at the Book Lounge, she tells a man that "'it is not fiction. Most of it isn't… but some of it is'" (382). She also keeps a diary trying to piece together what happened to her daughter, Laura, before her disappearance. She writes,

> I begin this diary again, a new final beginning, at the same hour I have put the pieces in motion that will result in the writing of my own life. The biographer now comes, invading my home and my mind; unlike others, no less malign in their way, I cannot deny him entry. (24)

This is a bid for Clare to find closure and absolution for her feelings of guilt. She believes she failed Laura and that she deserves the persecution she perceived the robbery of her father's judge's wig to be, and ultimately even possible prosecution for her being an imagined or real accessory to the murder of her sister and her husband. She writes a letter to Laura in her diary, using all the information she has at her disposal. However, the information is largely inaccurate, and thus one cannot consider these chapters to be true (though they are, in this moment, perhaps true for Clare). Even Clare sometimes concedes that she cannot take hold of the truth:

> There is the struggle between what I know – what was reported officially, what was reported to me in the last letter from you, the notebooks you kept before you disappeared completely, Laura – and what I imagine. I feel towards the place where the line between the reported and the imagined must lie. But how do I know when and where my own mind pushes that line in one direction or the other, questioning reported fact

> as possible imagination, crediting fantasy with the reliability of fact? Can you imagine the force of my desire to know the truth from you, who can no longer tell it or else refuses to do so? (57)

By admitting that she does not know when her imagination transforms the line between fantasy and fact into a lie, Clare shows the reader her attempt at honesty and her awareness of the unreliability of the nature of assumed truth and memory. She is not deliberately deceitful (to herself or others); any lie she tells is because of lack of information or misinformation. Clare knows that she does not know. Clare turns to her daughter's notebook for information, but Laura herself warns her mother, "I only offer this document as my version of truth, a truth among many. Bernard's truth may be different, but he can't speak. Sam's truth would be different still, and he may yet speak" (173). Attempting to go to the original source of information also proves useless.

Clare's biographer plays an instrumental role in her journey, and he becomes a sounding board for her conclusions – which she shares with him in the hope that they will not only bring her a sense of release but might also help him deal with his own trauma. Not only is Clare seeking resolution to her own story, but she seeks this, too, for Sam. In the letter to Sam inviting him to a book festival, she writes,

> As busy as the Festival is bound to be, I shall nonetheless have ample time for you, please do not fear (I have this hunch that you spend a great deal of your life in fear; is that unfair?). What I mean is the only thing about this trip I look forward to is the promise of seeing you again. (324)

Clare hopes that by letting Sam into her life she can understand Laura's past and reasons for her disappearance. However, Sam denies her full access to what he knows. By doing this, Sam is also barring Clare from any help she may offer him. The

resolution she may afford him is contingent on the information he is willing to impart to her.

The dated chapters (“1989”, “1989–1998”, “1998–1999” and “1999”) written in the third person and in the past tense are designed to give the reader a detached view of Sam’s past. The timeline chronicles his life as a small boy, losing his parents and residing with his abusive Uncle Bernard. The first of these chapters is 1989, the year in which apartheid began to rapidly lose its grip on South Africa, seeing the resignation of P.W. Botha and pre-empting the release of Nelson Mandela the following year. Sam recalls positive times with his parents which act as a foil for the abuse he suffered at the hands of his uncle, seemingly a pro-apartheid operative burying corpses resulting from Afrikaner police brutality. Sam, the child, is so badly affected by Bernard’s abuses that,

> As he fell asleep, the boy imagined that he had the strength to tie Bernard to the front of the truck, so that his head was like a plough or the guard on the front of a train, and he dreamed of driving the truck so fast and forward, so that Bernard’s face became black with the road and the road became white with his face. (67)

The passionate outcry of this imagined torture he would like to befall Bernard emphasises the extent of the abuse he suffered from the uncaring uncle – who, it transpires later, took in his nephew to steal his inheritance to purchase the truck he uses to transport the aforesaid bodies from police stations. This fantasy also foreshadows Bernard’s death. The 1989 chapters recall Sam’s relationship with Laura and Sam’s memory of killing Bernard by driving over him repeatedly with the truck. He thinks of his parents’ funeral and seeing Professor Wald there, who came up to him offering assistance should he ever need it. The incorporation of these events in Sam’s life, specifically at this time, reflects in microcosm the suffering, violence, and

displacement experienced by oppressed people in South Africa just before the demise of apartheid.

In this pivotal year, Laura seems to be in cahoots with Bernard and it is her associates, Timothy and Lionel, who help the orphaned Sam. When Laura disappears, Sam is rejected by Clare and is subsequently taken to his Aunt Ellen who adopts him and changes his name from Lawrence to Leroux.

The omniscient third-person narrator, referring to Sam, states the following:

> He had only one picture of his parents together, with him in his mother's arms, and it was taken when he was only a few months old, and through everything that happened he kept it in his bag in a plastic sleeve between the pages of a book so that it wouldn't get bent or torn or broken. (92)

The narrator makes us aware of Sam's vulnerabilities, and we learn something of what informs his role as a biographer. For example, his decision to hide information from Clare to protect her suggests that his morality is informed by these experiences from his childhood. A biographer's artistic choices are never innocent, Flanery seems to say, and their motivations for swaying the reader this way and then that, their motivation in disclosing this about their subject and not that, has its roots somewhere in their psyche. Those reasons that inform their artistic choices may very rarely be as devastating as those that inform Sam's decisions, but they may be explained in some capacity nevertheless.

The dated chapters chronicle much of Sam's formative years and their highlights: his life with his aunt Ellen, his university career in New York and his meeting his wife Sara, as well as the news of his aunt's murder in Beaufort-West. We are privy to Sam's subjectivity. The reader is tasked with doing the work of trying to find continuity and

connection between these dated chapters of Sam's childhood and his life in the novel's present, trying to find connection, too, between these chapters and Clare's fictional reflections.

These chapters are dated, and this therefore suggests that they may be read as chronicles. This is a history, told from beginning to end, that merely documents what happened as it happened – a kind of forensic truth narrated by an objective and impartial historian. Yet the content betrays this expectation. We are intimately aware of Sam's mind. When he fantasises about killing Bernard, we know that there is no way a figure such as a historian, a chronicler, could know this information. One possibility, then, is that this information is the result of an omniscient narrator who has complete access to the mind and motivations of her characters. Another possibility is that it is Sam, himself (who knows and remembers all of this information), adopting the voice of an omniscient narrator, telling the story of his horrible past with the intelligence of an adult who is sufficiently distanced from the event so as to tell the story at all. If this is the case, then it may be that Sam tells this story as a means of making sense of, imposing order onto, a most chaotic and difficult time, tells it as a biography. By this I mean that Sam tells the story as an author who is not the subject, but of course he is. If this is so, then we must appreciate it as an act of invention, and must therefore also read it on its own terms, knowing, too, that Sam's impressions of this time in his life is told in retrospect. Gudmundsdóttir shows us the problems of writing of one's past as though inhabiting that past: "we can never speak authoritatively from the past, and it highlights the problem of the representation of the past, as the past is always in one way of another already mediated" (6). Sam's representation of the past must be taken as employing the tools of fiction in its telling, as all autobiography must do. Stil, we cannot be absolutely sure of the nature of this text and who is doing the telling. Flanery leaves us to speculate.

The complex and multiple narrative structures serve to highlight some of the author's main thematic concerns in the novel, such as truth, memory, forgiveness, fear and how the country constructs an identity for itself in contemporary South Africa. Holmes asks Flanery about the meaning behind the inclusion and reference to the TRC hearings: "Is the TRC an allegory for how historical representation fails but produces meaningful narratives nevertheless?" (442). Flanery answers:

> In many ways *Absolution* is concerned with gaps that open up in received historical narratives. Clare seeks to fill the gaps where Laura's absence remains, while Sam struggles to understand what drove his parents to their own activism, why Clare rejected him, what Laura's role was in his own and his parents' past. (445)

Flanery, in another interview, expands on the kinds of truth on which he wishes to meditate, the truths based on the TRC's multiple definitions of the word:

> The TRC imagined four varieties of truth: forensic (the objective, scientific version of events); narrative (the individual's subjective version of events); dialogic or discursive (which I understand the "truth" that emerges from the interplay between the forensic and narrative forms of truth); and, finally, restorative truth (the version of events necessary for resolution, perhaps one might think of this as a kind of "therapeutic" narrative). (7)

Stephen Clingman, in "On Ethical Grounds", offers insight into what these truths were meant to accomplish:

> The TRC's central notion of justice, which had to do not so much with standard definitions (retribution, restoration) but was, in some deeper

> way than our social practices normally allow, philosophical. Here "truth" was inseparable – for perpetrators of the crimes that were uncovered – from acknowledgment and accountability. For many victims of the crimes, and their relatives, truth was connected not so much with restitution but to ascertain kind of peace – the inner peace that knowledge of the truth at last might afford. The very form the TRC took announced this, for it was comprised not of trials but, in some profound sense, of hearings. (280)

Absolution is to a large extent "a hearing" in which the protagonists are hoping for the establishment of a measure of closure for perceived crimes committed associated with their apartheid past, rather than a trial aimed at exacting retribution or restitution. In the novel, two transcripts of TRC hearings are unceremoniously inserted between the "Clare" and "Sam" chapters (more or less in the middle of the novel). Two "small voices" crying out to be heard, climactic in their humble relaying of the true horror of apartheid. It is significant that in the "Clare" chapter that precedes the first TRC hearing insertion, Clare (addressing Laura in a letter or diary entry) tells her that she has printed off some of the TRC transcripts and states, "I read through the ones I think relate to you in some way, Laura, to your case and your activities". She goes on to write, "Often your name is not there at all, and I have no choice but to infer your involvement in the events described: the opening of a letter bomb at a government office, the aftermath of an attack on a refinery" (109). The chapter is one of serious reflection and involves Sam, who is a little boy in the time the transcripts speak about. Clare, from Laura's notebook, is trying to piece together what happened to her, and later the truth of Laura's past is brought into question.

The first TRC transcript is pivotal as it is presented in the format of an actual TRC report which suggests its authenticity. The date is provided as well as place, victim, violation, and the words "Testimony from: Louis Louw" (116). The diction is pertinent

as the word “testimony” makes the declaration of his evidence under oath not only appear reliable but also the ingeniousness of his responses to the chairperson all the more poignant. The questions and answers are presented in the first person which further adds to its immediacy**.** Opening the hearing with a reference to technical hitches with the sound system enhances the truthfulness of what is to come – everything is recorded, even information that seems superfluous to what is important to the core of the narrative.

This transcript depicts his hearing on the 4th of June, 1996. His violation is that he was injured in a bomb blast. Louw describes opening a parcel in a government office, which sets off a bomb that causes him to lose both his legs, two arms and one eye. He describes having had a loving family – a wife and two small children who eventually left him. He simply asks what the government is going to do to help him. He adds quite simply, “I’m talking about everyday life you must understand. This attack happened in everyday life, me just minding my own business, and in everyday life we always got along with everyone, our family” (117). The simplicity and sincerity of his plea affects the audience whom the chairperson needs to reprimand with, “Quiet please. That really is the last warning. If there is another outburst, I will have to clear the room” (121).

The inclusion of this ordinary man, a government employee, is pertinent. His Afrikaans name, Louis Louw, calls to mind apartheid-coded connotations. This should evoke feelings of moral decrepitude – if not trepidation – and yet the soft alliteration of the name itself suggests a gentleness and lack of aggression, which positions his audience positively towards him from the outset. This underpins the horror of his having been collateral damage in political ideological conflict, thus demonstrating both the praise and the critique associated with the TRC. The ordinary man is given the space to tell his story because, as he says, “I want people to know what happened to people like me” (119), which speaks exactly to the objectives of the TRC. However, in response

to his question, “What are you going to do to help me?” (121), there is no answer proffered**.**

According to Stephen Clingman, although “the TRC did provide material reparations for victims, these were fairly paltry, and by no means could approximate the degree of devastation that had been caused” (280). The chairperson sidesteps his question with another and asks Louw if he would like to say anything “to those who have accepted responsibility for the attack” (121). Louw’s simple, humble answer adds to the poignancy of his plea. He does not seek revenge, but rather he says, “What can I say? I guess it was war. But they were fighting us, and we were just defending ourselves. That’s all. And me I was just a clerk” (121). Testimonies of this nature provide the victims – and often perpetrators – an opportunity to experience not only a release from trauma but also an opportunity to experience catharsis. Stephen Clingman suggests that the latter “was the reparation at the heart of the idea, a repair – something that more superficial versions of the concept override. It had everything to do with South Africa’s release from the past – not from its memory, but from its captivation – into the future” (280). The inclusion of an Afrikaner’s testimony as a site of truth within the fictional construct serves as an important historical record.

The second TRC transcript is cryptically placed between the “Clare” and “Sam” chapters where Clare, in her chapter, dreams of recording her book *Absolution* in a hired studio, but the dream turns into a nightmare because there are no words on the page. She turns to Laura’s notebooks again to piece together her story. Distraught as a result of Laura’s disappearance, she and her husband “cannot put her to rest” (141). She describes Laura and Sam’s meeting with Lionel and Timothy at the camp site, where Sam is clearly traumatised. She mentions that she killed Bernard to free Sam from his abuser. The two men ask her to give them a lift to a clinic near Beaufort West. The chapter ends wIth Clare admitting that she had failed Laura, who needed her to take responsibility for Sam.

This chapter, fraught with mystery, trauma and guilt, is a fitting precursor to the second TRC transcript where again an innocent worker, Jimmy Sukwini, lost his life in an ANC bomb attack on a refinery. His wife, Ethel Sukwini, offers her testimony at the TRC hearing. Her plea is for someone to come to her to say sorry. She is “only a teacher” (150), she says, again alluding to an ordinary citizen suffering loss, and consequently being deeply affected by a “war” in which she was not personally involved in. Thus, not only has the privileged Clare Wald, the renowned author, suffered the loss of her loved one, or Sam Leroux, who suffered the loss of his parents, t also the ordinary man in the street. Thus, tragedy has touched every walk of South African society.

The inclusion of this transcript is significant because (as in the first transcript) Clare suspects that Laura may have been involved in the refinery blast. This is deliberately mysterious as it is not clear whether Laura was involved in the blast or if it is indeed the refinery blast in question, and then meets Sam whilst on the run after instigating it. However, it clearly links to the transcript where Mrs Sukwini says, “My husband worked the night shift and when someone phoned to say the refinery had blown up I knew in my heart that he was dead” (150). This casts a shadow of doubt over the rationale behind violent liberation revolution as it critiques the necessity for the loss of innocent lives, where ironically a black man is killed by a bomb planted by the ANC, South Africa’s most important participants in its liberation movement.

Sam, the biographer, wishes to express his truth in narrative form, doing so “in the context of the late stages of apartheid” as Flanery describes in his interview (7). Clare expresses her truth(s) using several of these methods described as well. And within the text, there are two moments in which we are given something akin to documentary truth, something akin to the forensic truth described – transcripts from TRC hearings. These extracts stand formally apart from the narrative. They interrupt the text as the reader attempts to draw connections, to the plot or characters. The extracts serve, first,

to remind the reader of the history upon which the narrative is based, reminding us of the devastating reality of the fiction. They are read as texts that stand outside of what we hold in our hands (they are read as texts that exist in the reader's world), and so we are shocked by their implied measurable reality. They also serve as a framing device for our reading. We learn from them about how to discern truth, and the other ways in which it may be expressed beyond the kind of truth that is expressed in fiction. The fiction and the real document inform each other's meaning, demonstrating to us how they borrow from each other (in historical fact, in narrative form, in affect) to come to tend towards some truth, and to absolution, which neither the extracts nor the narrative (Flanery's story) achieve in isolation.

The title of the Flanery's text is the same as Clare's novel. Absolution, or its acquisition, abounds in the novel. It is also what defines the objectives of the TRC. The word "absolution", according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* means "a formal setting free from guilt, sentence, or obligation; ecclesiastical declaration of forgiveness of sins; remission of penance; forgiveness". The word "absolute" is related in the sense that it means complete; perfect; pure. Thus, absolution alludes to complete forgiveness. Despite complete absolution being existentially unattainable (the irony upon which the novel is hinged), the author's concern in the novel is the necessity to strive towards it, despite Clare's confession being dismissed by her lawyer son – there is merit in her striving towards divulging the truth, albeit her truth. This is nuanced in Clingman's statement regarding the TRC, that "there was a redemptive element in the hearings – in the intentions underlying them in their methods and procedures, and, in some broad sense in their results" (280).

The theme of absolution links to the TRC and highlights what Flanery himself said he was trying to achieve in his novel, namely that he was trying to write into the novel what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was trying to do – that is, to allow for multiple kinds of truth, not complete absolution, per se. He achieves this through the characters

who have competing versions of the past and their memories informing the present. These thematic concerns can be linked to what has been defined as “confessional writing” (Grzeda). However, the fictional biographer in *Absolution* as a central character is more than a catalyst for the critical exploration of confessional writing because he himself is involved in the narration. Paulina Grzeda points out in, “The Ethico-Politics of Autobiographical Writings”, that:

> Confessional writing in English has been burgeoning in South Africa over the past two decades. Covering a wide social range, autobiographies of novelists to political leaders, social activists and journalists, artists and scientists have all contributed to forging a considerable repertoire of individual testimonies making up the inclusive history of South African society. (77)

This reflects the main concerns of the novel in which both protagonists seek absolution through confessing wrongs they believe to have committed in the past. Furthermore, the confessions of Clare and Sam do not only have personal implications but also have larger national and political implications. Grzeda states:

> Outside of the instrumentalising context of the resistance struggle, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s dissuasive tendency to subsume personal testimonies within the hegemonic national discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation, the current publishers’ increased interest in individual testimonies should not come as a surprise. Indeed, the contemporary proliferation of autobiographical writings can be seen as intrinsically embedded in the general tendency of post-millennial South African fiction to turn the public sphere towards the private one, to reclaim space for auto-critique, self-questioning, and expression of personal grief. (77)

Grzeda's idea of confessional writing spills over into the fictional realm of *Absolution*, where certainly not only are the national apartheid concerns interrogated, but it also embodies the "turning from the public sphere to the private sphere" and to a large extent does "reclaim space for auto-critique, self-questioning and an expression of personal grief" (77). Clare, in spite of showing her doubts about autobiographical writing – she says to Sam, "I don't entirely believe in the value of life-writing" (4) – is writing her version of a (fictionalised) memoir. The latter literally becomes a springboard for her "auto-critique, self-questioning and her expression of personal grief".

Grzeda's comments also explain Sam's implication in the story. Though writing the life of another, Flanery demonstrates to an extreme degree how the life of the biographer must always be intertwined with the life of the biographical subject (for better or worse, unintentionally or not). The life of one informs the life of the other, where there is always experiential exchange between the two personalities. This, Flanery seems to say, is inescapable.

Right from the first page of the novel, the themes of memory, truth and fiction are made apparent through Sam's status of implicated biographer as he recounts the meeting between himself and his subject Clare Wald. There is deception on the part of both characters as they blatantly lie or avoid revealing what they know of each others' past. In his hesitation in telling Clare of Laura's past, Sam thinks,

> I think of all I might say, how I could, in one way, write the end of Laura's story for Clare. But it's not for me to do. I know that the end I could provide would only be the beginning of another volume, the reading of which Clare might not survive. (374)

The search for truth, and by extension absolution, is not only impossible to achieve completely, but is also suggested in this passage that isa process. Speaking of biography as a process, Hedley Twidle (in *Experiments with Truth*) articulates the difficulty in

> writing up the lives of other people; writing down their words.
>
> Writing up in the sense of filing a report, an article or even a PhD: forms premised on closure, judgement the production of usable information, often for a distant audience. Writing down in the sense of transcribing, notating, translating and re-ordering the words spoken by somebody else. (15)

Twidle describes the different processes that come to represent a life (especially a life other than one's own). What Twidle refers to as writing down describes the messy middle of the process of capturing a life. Writing up is far too constricting for Twidle, who believes that the uncertainty and lack of finality in writing down is a far more productive model in thinking about how lives may be represented. Thinking of biography as a process more accurately represents one's understanding of life as a process, too.

Flanery seems to suggest a similar model for how a life may be textualized; that is, that life is a process. One of the ways he does this is mixing different modes of representation throughout the novel, each mode an attempt at biographical representation. And even though we have been confronted with several kinds of text throughout the novel (with the novel being another kind of text altogether), none of them are able to offer complete absolution, but a tending towards it. Sam now offers the suggestion of yet another text in response, perpetuating the process, showing also that the history by which this absolution is defined has not ended in absolution either.

The *GQ* blurb, provided before the preface of the novel begins, states that

> Patrick Flanery is an extraordinary new writer and *Absolution* shines a light on contemporary South Africa and the long shadow of apartheid, the elusive nature of truth and self-perception, and the mysterious alchemy of the creative process.(2)

This comment is pertinent to the essence of this thesis – the role of the figure of the fictional biographer is a central concern, clearly establishing how much fact and fiction intermingle with the themes to support the aesthetic of the postmodern construct. The use of the fictional biographer, Sam Leroux, is pivotal to the complex, multi-layered structure of the novel where the writer of the life of another writer becomes the central character of the narrative himself. He becomes a confessional instrument to reflect the profound themes entwined in Flanery's exploration of those notions of truth, memory, forgiveness, fear and identity in (post)apartheid South Africa – all concepts which are synonymous with Flanery's aim to write the tenets of the TRC into the narrative.

Absolution epitomises the postmodern novel due to its overall fragmented structure. In his interview with Christopher Holmes, Flanery comments on this intertextuality: "I knew that I wanted additional other texts – letters, e-mails, press-reports, fictionalised TRC transcripts – to form a collage which comes together to tell a story from multiple perspectives" (440). The textual fragmentation reflects the kind of existential fragmentation felt by the various characters in the novel. The four narrative voices drive the plotline, foregrounding the novel's interest in extreme subjectivity within a postmodern and (post)apartheid context. There is a clear disenchantment with politics and the capitalism which gives rise to the discrepancy between the rich and the poor in South Africa. Pastiche is evident as the reference to diary and journal entries attests to, as well as TRC documentation, and the novel within the novel. The recollections of

the past and the temporal distortions thereof, because of the unreliability of memory, are explored, and are contrasted with the present timeframe. The unexpected narrative shifts and the frequent comments on storytelling make it a metafictional novel concerned with its own construction. All these postmodernist elements function positively toward Flanery's objective: demonstrating the process (severely flawed and sometimes unsatisfactory though it is) of doing the necessary work of attempting to find absolution, to reckon with one's history.

Philippe Lejeune's view applies to *Absolution*: the novel helps us come closer to the truth than autobiography would. Lejeune posits the following in his essay "The Autobiographical Contract",

> What is this "truth" that the novel helps us to come closer to than the autobiography, if not the personal, individual, intimate truth of the author, that is, that very thing which is the object of any biographical project? So, to speak, it is insofar as it is autobiography that the novel is declared to be closer to the truth. (217)

He goes on to counterargue this statement, but concludes that the writer is actually extending the autobiographical contract when he realises when he is clear about the "limits and inadequacies of his autobiography" (217). Incharacters (sometimes inadvertently) seem to blur the distinctions between the different kinds of mode within which they operate.

The novel is a high self-aware pastiche of styles and textual modes, all expressed through the four kinds of truth that the TRC wished its participants to engage in. Yet it is perhaps that the novel, more than the sum of its parts, suggests that Flanery is ultimately working towards a fifth kind of truth expression, one that is defined by a *combination* of all four forms of truth within the text. Truth, as close as we can get to

it, Flanery seems to suggest, is achieved not through one method alone (biographical, forensic, and so forth), but requires experimentation and a willingness to establish unusual and surprising connections. This may not grant us absolution, or allow us to see truth for all that it is, but it may, at the very least, illuminate on the merits of the forms of narrative we use to establish these truths. This is perhaps one of the lessons that Sam the biographer learns at the end of the text. A life, especially one that is so ethically and politically compromised, requires several forms of narrative intervention, several forms of truth, to come to some semblance of self-understanding.

Conclusion: Beyond the Facts (of a Life)

Truth, including literary truth, which essentially involves a heightened understanding not only of metafictional concerns but also an understanding of life itself, is at the centre of this study's appreciation of the fictional biographer. The fictional biographers in the five primary texts display numerous similarities and differences in this regard. The choice of a fictional biographer in each of the novels highlights the importance of the writer of a life as not only a character in the narrative but also often as the conduit for the hidden voice of the author in either a self-reflexive mode or a satirically didactic one. In each novel the narrator and fictional biographer seem to be the same person or persons, as in the case in *Possession* which is polyvocal. In "The Aspern Papers" the fictional biographer is unnamed, whereas in the other four primary texts the fictional biographers are named: Mr Vincent in *Summertime*; Phineas G Nanson in *The Biographer's Tale*; Roland Mitchell, Maud Bailey, James Blackadder, Fergus Wolf, Leonora Stern and Mortimer P Cropper in *Possession*; and Sam Leroux in *Absolution*. There appears to be an interesting collocation on multiple levels amongst these specific texts.

In "The Art of Biography", Woolf attempts to advocate for a mode of biographical writing that seeks to present information that is not merely historical and factual record:

> The biographer does more than stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the greatest. For few poets and novelists are capable of that high degree of tension which gives us reality. But almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders. (126)

J.M. Coetzee says much the same about the facts embedded in his own (life) writing. Coetzee's interview with David Atwell in *Doubling the Point* speaks to this, and is pertinent to the metafictional aspects prevalent in each text and echoes the philosophical thoughts of the philosophers mentioned in this thesis such as Virginia Woolf, Roland Barthes, Michael Foucault and Philippe Lejeune. Coetzee writes,

> we should distinguish two kinds of truth, the first truth to fact, the second something beyond that; and that, in the present context, we should take truth to fact for granted and concentrate on the more vexing question of a "higher" truth… As you write […] you have to feel whether you are getting closer to "it" or not (17-18)

James, Byatt and Flanery reflect very similar views in their writing. Truth is expounded in the five novels, I will use J.M. Coetzee's definition as a springboard to make comparative references to the truth. In "The Aspern Papers" a play on fact and fiction is evident, as James foregrounds "factual truth" as well as truth that goes beyond that, "higher truth". Marilyn Vickery argues that, based on Reader Response theory, "without an audience and interpretation, a piece of literature does not have value and does not elicit a truth. It has to communicate" (ii). Like J.M. Coetzee, James "calls this truth 'it' and equates 'it' to heart and the artistic muse" (Vickery ii). The fictional process (of the biographer's deceit as well as of James' storytelling) leads to an apprehension of a truth that goes beyond mere fact as the reader understands the "tension" that "exists between art and life" in "The Aspern Papers" (James, *The Aspern Papers and Other Tales* xxvi). This tension is dramatised throughout the story as the unnamed fictional biographer-editor demonstrates how from lies, deceit and obfuscation (fiction) there emerges some truth (especially a truth about the fictional biographer as character himself).

It is important to note that the novels' biographers do not function merely as biographers, but as characters too. These biographers are implicated in the lies the author wishes to tell, implicated in the truths and their consequences upon which the authors wish to reflect. Mr Vincent must always juggle the delicate matter of writing what is true about John's life, or omitting what is potentially hurtful. When Clare Wald, in *Absolution*, writes of her own life, she must navigate several sensitivities around her life and the lives of others that are connected to her own: she must write about her belief that she was responsible for her sister's and brother in-law's deaths, and that she was not a good mother to her daughter Laura whose disappearance, and her refusal to help the boy at the door at Laura's request, haunts her. And Sam Leroux, Clare's biographer, feels the need to confess the murder of his abusive uncle Bernard. These novels show that we can never think of the biographer in an abstract, pure form. The biographer is always intimately connected to her subject's life, especially (but not exclusively) when that subject is alive.

At the end of *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas G Nanson, though he begins the novel averse to the practice of biography and, especially, autobiography, comes to embrace both, recognising each for their creative potential. He discovers himself, and the pleasure in the process of writing about this discovery, all instigated by Scholes Destry-Scholes, a dead biographer who is reanimated through Phineas' own searching through the lies Destry-Scholes told about himself and his subjects. In *Possession*, too, we have Randolph Henry Ash, a dead poet whose true secrets (particularly that he knew his illegitimate daughter) can never be known by his many biographers.

The traces left behind by the dead biographees (sometimes detectable, sometimes not) speak to the kinds of traces left by history more generally. It is the biographers' duty, these texts seem to say, to discover and narrativize the truths to which these traces point, even if they are sometimes misleading or undetectable. In *Absolution*,

these traces assume a politically historical bent that extends its reach to the present. The past South African apartheid ideology resonates throughout the novel. Even the fictional biographer, Sam Leroux, is not exempt from the trauma he experienced during that time as a child. Fact and fiction intermingle to describe Sam's predicament as a character and biographer, but also to demonstrate the difficulty in writing truthfully about South Africa's past. Of the kinds of truth Flanery incorporates into his novel (inspired by the kinds of truth sought by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), Flanery argues that "Restorative truth is perhaps something that *Absolution* does not encompass, but toward which it gestures" (439). Flanery continues:

> The TRC was imperfect. It was incomplete. It does not represent the totality of late apartheid history. I would argue that this is a rather perfect encapsulation of history writ large: imperfect, incomplete, and incapable of representing anything in totality. Is this where novelistic history steps in? (444)

All the texts concerned in this project consider this question about the value of fiction, the novel, in mapping the territory beyond the gaze of (personal) history. The stories seem to suggest that it takes an act of dynamic and radical creation to fully represent truth. By discussing the need for creative intervention in the writing of life history, the authors show that the mode often used to carry these narratives (life-writing) must itself be adaptable if it is to achieve a truth that is more wholly representative of history. Life-writing is not static but an ever-changing genre, employed by each author in different capacities to find their truths, often doing so indirectly and stumbling across some truths unexpectedly.

For all the truths the novels aim to reveal, it is still the truth of the author (in some cases the author of the novel itself) that the text wishes to leave undisturbed (or that the text shows can never be absolutely knowable). Henry James suggested the author

should be wary of using the first-person narrator which might subconsciously give away personal, even secret details of the author's life, and thus he advocated for the depersonalisation of the author, which is clear in "The Aspern Papers" where his fictional biographer is unnamed, and the reader is not even privy to the false name he proffers on his visiting card to the ladies Bordereau. However, there is a coherence between James' fictional output and his real-life situation where the Aspern papers are burnt just as his own real-life letters were burnt in 1909. His main concern as depicted in his novellas is that an author should be evaluated by his work and not by the private details of his life story. This echoes *Summertime*'s intimations when J.M. Coetzee teases his readers' assumed knowledge of his private space and produces an account of his life under the guise of the factual, thereby re-inventing his public self by subverting the true biographical form where he himself is the real author of his deceased fictional self, but is distanced paradoxically through Mr Vincent, his fictional biographer, who seems to parody his own writing to drive home a point. Byatt's *Possession* reflects the same concern with the public space when she shows how Ellen Ash deliberately edits her personal journal, anticipating possible external future readers. Byatt's Ellen Ash is perhaps more removed from Byatt herself (unlike John Coetzee in *Summertime* or even, to some extent, the biographer in "The Aspern Papers", both of whom may be read as variations of their authors, and certainly not the authors themselves).

This comparison brings to mind the search for "self" in the novels, and how they do so differently. Paul John Eakin in *Writing Life-writing: Narrative, History Autobiography (*2020) makes a pertinent link between narrative and identity. He argues against Oliver Sacks' bold claim that "each of us constructs and lives a narrative" (2). Eakin's definition is somewhat different: he states that "we are trained as children to attach special importance to one kind of selfhood, that of the extended self. The extended self is the self of memory and anticipation, extending across time" (2). For Eakin, it is that we define ourselves according to the materials and metaphors that shape our life

narratives. I veer towards this description (bearing in mind there are various psychological studies that examine the exceptional cases of people who are without linguistic structures to ratify these definitions). Yet, the concern of this thesis is the investigation into the way self is identifiable in the specific primary texts – the self of the biographical subject most obviously, but also, in some cases, the biographer. In the cases in which we learn more of the biographer rather than the biographical subject, it seems that the biographical subject comes to stand as an extended self of the biographer. In *The Biographer's Tale*, for example, we may read Phineas, by Eakin's definition, as a character whose inadvertent knowledge of Destry-Scholes comes to inform Phineas himself. Destry-Scholes recedes from meaning as much as Phineas comes into his own. Knowledge of a life does not flow from biographical subject to biographer in this case, but the other way around. Phineas had to endeavour to investigate the life of another person to know his own personhood.

That we learn of the biographer through the biographical subject is perhaps true of all the novels in this study except perhaps *Summertime*, where we learn almost nothing of John Coetzee's biographer, Mr Vincent. In *Summertime*, Mr Vincent seems to be used by Coetzee as a means to explore J.M. Coetzee's life narrative (or as much of it as J.M. Coetzee, the author, is willing to disclose) – Mr Vincent is the prototypical, invisible biographer. It is instead through the interviewees that we tend towards some knowledge of Coetzee, and even then we can never be sure of their accuracy within a fictional context.

Many of the novels within this study style the revelation of the self as a confessional. The subject begins as an unknown entity and moves through the narrative as one who is, not necessarily known, but tending towards being known. In *Possession*, Randolph Henry Ash, his wife Ellen Best Ash, and Christabel LaMotte all reveal their deepest feelings incrementally (or incrementally as far as the pacing and structure of the narrative would have us believe). (In the same way, Roland and Maud are tentative to

confess their love for each other.) Randolph, Ellen and Christabel encode their feelings (their true selves) through text, especially poetry. Their feelings are even concealed in their own diaries – they cannot reveal themselves to themselves. Phineas in *The Biographer's Tale* avoids any semblance of self-definition throughout the novel, and only by the end must finally admit that the text we have been reading is about him.

In *Summertime* we have as our central figure an absent (dead) author in a novel by an author who reveals himself through notes and diary entries. In this novel the mingling of fact and fiction is corroborated in Kannemeyer's real biography of the real author who is still alive. Along with the interviews, the novel is comprised of extracts from "Notebooks"; Kannemeyer points out that the Notebooks and the fragments at the end of the novel are real: "Coetzee wrote them himself" (605). It is in these notebook entries that J.M. Coetzee (through John Coetzee) speaks his "true" feelings, is his most confessional. Yet we only ever get scraps of these, scraps that never form a satisfying, coherent narrative of the man overall. We take what we can get.

The most pointed example of these texts taking on a confessional tone is Flanery's *Absolution*. Sam and Clare are desperate to share their stories, their misdeeds. Sam wants to confess that he was implicated in the death of his uncle. Clare wants to come clean about her involvement in the deaths of her sister and brother-in-law. Neither is able to confess these matters in earnest or to their satisfaction.

That characters are written through this confessional style suggests some element of shame, a lack of resolution, an incompleteness, that accompanies their identity, especially considering instances when they resist revealing themselves to themselves. Through obscuring the human subject, it seems some of these texts endeavour to use and manipulate the biographical and novelistic form not to expose but to conceal. Styling the text as a confessional (in part) also lends it some degree of verisimilitude: we are tricked into believing that the character is real because of her or his

unwillingness to divulge information to readers who are not part of their world. In knowing the subject's secrets, the reader becomes complicit in the lie, the deception (of even self-deception). Knowing that there are aspects of a character's life that are hidden offers one a sense that there is more to the life than what is depicted on the page. The character goes beyond what the novel can contain.

Writing of a subject's interiority may be perceived as quite myopic, though this is far from the case with the novels in question. The biography (the mode most readily referred to, parodied, or mocked in these novels) may be understood as a literary representation of a single life framed between the covers of a single book. Indeed, *Summertime* is a novel (an autobiography of sorts) that is representative of one man's life. In *Possession*, we have several biographers who commit themselves to the study of one subject each. Yet each of these texts (as well as the rest in this study) slowly breaks upon the (auto)biographer's realisation that this is not so, cannot be so.

Speaking of the assumption of individual singularity in autobiographical writing (in modes such as the personal essay, memoir, or autobiography), Merve Emre reminds us that the "historical and aesthetic function" of these sorts of texts

> has been to persuade us not just that personhood is beautiful or good, but that it is primordial – that individual subjectivity and its expression exist prior to the social formations that gave rise to it. This is a lie, the lie that subtends bourgeois individualism and all its intrusions into language, art, and education…. The personal essay appears as the purest, most unflinching aesthetic expression of the lie, for the simple reason that, for an essay to qualify as personal in the first place, the primacy of the private individual must be presupposed…. (43)

What the texts in this study endeavour to demonstrate is that the self is not merely a singular (or insular) entity. The self only in part stands as an isolated being against a white, or decontextualised and unpopulated backdrop. The texts demonstrate that the self may be understood as a synecdochic representation of other bodies of society, nation, culture. In "The Aspern Papers", the biographer is quick to realise that, in getting to the heart of his subject, he must encounter the women by whom Aspern was surrounded. There is no direct access to the man, as his life was a composite of other relationships that defined him. In *Summertime*, John Coetzee's life is refracted through the lives of five other people. In *Possession*, the biographers must reckon with the fact that writing on her or his biographical subject necessitates that they rely on the biographical knowledge of what another biographer is writing on – writing on Randolph Henry Ash means also writing on Christabel LaMotte. And in *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas finds difficulty in writing about Scholes Destry-Scholes without having to refer to the subjects of Destry-Scholes biographies. Among Phineas's most important realisations in the novel is that Destry-Scholes is in fact a composite of Linnaeus, Ibsen and Galton (as they were conceived by Destry-Scholes himself).(23

Each novel demonstrates to us that connections between people are what defines individuals. It is in this way that each of the novels show how the nature of the biography is deceptive. It is also the case that each person, the novels show, is a composite of not only other people, but also other ideas, political ideologies and artistic movements. In *Absolution*, most obviously, we have characters whose personalities and biographical history may only be understood in light of the national history to which they identify. We know of Sam Leroux's uncertainty of self upon entering South Africa after having lived in America for so long because we understand the (post)apartheid condition. We understand the weight of Clare's confessions because of the impossibly devastating apartheid history to which that confession is tethered. In "The Aspern Papers", we see Henry James' dramatization of the dangerous effects of obsession in a context of the beginnings of the age of celebrity culture. And in *Possession*, the lives

of women, in their positions as both biographer and biographical subject, are stifled because of the compromises forced upon them by sexist gatekeepers. It is not despite their literary contexts that these novels are able to position themselves politically in this way, but because of it.

Summertime is perhaps the harder sell as a novel with a political agenda. It is a novel placed so firmly within a postmodern context that it seems only to be about itself. But within the fictional structures that allude to past factual episodes in the novel, the effects of socio-political events facilitate an exploration of truth and offer possible explanations for the public situations over which the individual may or may not have any control. It is a novel that is not unaware of John Coetzee's political environment.

Mr Vincent, the interviewer, asks Sophie if Coetzee was apolitical. She answers, "No not apolitical, I would rather say anti-political" (228). Sophie explains,

> In Coetzee's eyes, we human beings will never abandon politics because politics is too convenient and too attractive as a theatre in which to give play to our baser emotions. Baser emotions meaning hatred and rancour and spite and jealousy and bloodlust and so forth. In other words, politics is a symptom of our fallen state. (229)

Thus, Coetzee's political understanding goes far beyond the existential as it embraces a sense of a "personal ethico-resonsibility [that] finds its best expression in the act of writing" (Grzeda 98). So, though perhaps anti-political, if we are to take Sophie's response as true to J.M. Coetzee's own sentiments, it is still not the case that the position being described is amoral (or anti-moral, to use Sophie's prefix). Sophie seems to position Coetzee in a space before politics. This may still be considered a political act, though, more importantly to my point, it still shows that Coetzee is writing of a life that is aware of its own consequential positionality. The text's postmodern

characteristics are evident, but it is not only about its own construction. It is aware of the (political) world the reader inhabits, too.

The texts have a firm footing in modernism and postmodernism, literary movements that demonstrate a hyper-awareness of the constructed nature of art. These texts are typical in this way. But they are not textually insular. Even when their concerns are almost exclusively textual, the novels pronounce these matters with political inflections. *The Biographer's Tale* is a text that concludes with a realisation that both Phineas and his biographical subject, Destry-Scholes, have constructed themselves out of text. But herein lies the novel's affirming revelation: one can construct an identity for oneself, reinvent oneself, through the infinite flexibility of the text. The novel, along with all the others in this study, shows us that a belief in the fixity of identity is not a consideration in a postmodern context. This may or may not function as liberatory.

The role of the fictional biographers in the five primary texts speak to the kinds of reservations expressed in Paula R. Backscheider in her concluding remarks in her iconic book, *Reflections on Biography* (2001), referred to in this study at several points. Backscheider writes:

> And perhaps, just perhaps, the time is coming when reviewers will think and write about how a biography is written. Rather than reciting the most exciting parts of a subject's life, they will tell us how well it is written and composed, how skilfully evidence is used and intelligently interpretation done, how decisions are made about personality and life shape, whether it is art, and whether a respectable or exemplary actualisation of form. (235)

"The Aspern Papers", *Summertime*, T*he Biographer's Tale*, *Possession* and *Absolution* are all texts concerned with the nature of their respective biographical

subjects and their biographers. They are interested in their characters. Yet their interests in these figures are not without consideration of the mode in which they are written. Each author demonstrates acute sensitivity to the sway of the mode of biography, how it is received, the assumptions readers impose onto the mode. It is through this formal play that the texts speak to Backscheider's concerns. Biography is about people, the texts declare, but the truth of these biographical subjects, the fidelity of their lives, is offered only to the extent as the (auto)biographical form will allow. The texts are exercises in critical reading of life-writing.

This critical reading extends to acts of overreading, of reading this or any other kind of text with the assumption that what we receive is a representation of the author through and through. Besides, it is not necessarily the author's lives that ought to interest us in the novels. (That information can never be known with certainty, anyway.) The more interesting (and graspable) query has to do with the nature of life-writing itself – its processes, its currency, its reception, and so forth. We come away from each of these texts not knowing much, or any differently, about the authors who wrote them. But we do come away with a greater sense of awareness of the constructed nature of writing a life. This is achieved obliquely. None of the novels makes any definitive claims about life-writing. Their modernist and postmodernist traits, reliant on evasion, absence, obfuscation and irony, ensure that we are left with questions that are impossible answer. This is perhaps the more productive approach. Coming away with the impression of definitive answers of a life would, by extension, imply that the mode in which that life is represented is a reliable method of inquiry into any one person's history, preoccupations, desires. We would come away with the belief that we have acquired the individual rendered coherently in facts, to use a word Virginia Woolf looks upon with the greatest suspicion. But life's formlessness, its false starts, its ironies and circularity would betray any suggestion that it can be ordered within a narrative. It is in this way that the novels in this discussion are at their most productive; we come to know very little about the biographical subject in each case; and we know very little,

too, about the merits of any one mode appropriate enough to encapsulate a life. The texts merely offer suggestions, musings, meditations about how to write of a life (and never suggest that we can ever completely know a life in its coherent totality); the texts show that the variety of a life ought to reflect in a variety of textual modes of representation. Through each text's sense of play and experimentation, we are given enough to acquire a sense of the scope of the impossible task of capturing a life in text.

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