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Reconstructing Biographical Archives

A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* and Graham Swift's *Ever After*

by Paulina Kupisz

‘The art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts’, observes professor Ormerod Goode, one of the characters of A. S. Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale* and the academic tutor of the novel’s protagonist, narrator, and biographer-to-be, Phineas G. Nanson.¹ Phineas is a young postgraduate student, dejected and disillusioned with studying and applying poststructuralist literary theories. During one of his seminars, he suddenly decides to change radically his academic direction and is subsequently advised to embark on a biographical quest of Scholes Destry-Scholes, an eminent but underrated biographer of a Victorian polymath, Sir Elmer Bole. The opposition between the theoretically oriented academic environment and the everyday life-bound art of biography, which is visible in the opening scenes of the novel, confirms what Dana Greene notices in her recent essay on the increase in biographical publications flooding the reading market:

In spite of this history, or perhaps because of its deeply personal, probing nature, as a genre, biography grew up largely independent of the academy. It was seen as the work of self-trained amateurs or of those who have fallen off the wagon of their disciplinary training. It did not fit neatly into the curricular organisation of the university’.²

Phineas, at first, also feels reluctant about his future task. To him, biography is ‘a bastard form, a dilettante pursuit. Tales told by those incapable of true inventions, simple stories for those incapable of true critical insight’.³ However, these familiar opinions become subject to revision and reformulation; the more Phineas proceeds in his search, the stronger he realises that the life of the individual is an amalgam of other lives, occurrences, bits of history and culture criss-crossed with personal memories, subjective impressions, and momentary emotions, behind which it is truly difficult and, sometimes, impossible to grasp the biographee’s true Self.

Similar concerns of collecting biographical facts appear in Graham Swift’s novel *Ever After*. Bill Unwin, an underrated Oxford scholar regaining his physical and emotional health on the university campus after a suicidal attempt, traces the life of his ancestor Matthew Pearce, a nineteenth-century geologist and follower of Darwinian thought who lost his faith in God and was subsequently forced to leave his wife (a clergyman’s daughter) and children. The notebooks with which Bill is working, left by Matthew Pearce to his wife and bequeathed from generation to generation, are but a starting point in constructing an intricate, labyrinthine biographical archive of bits and pieces of history, literature, recollected family memories, and momentary reflections.

In this paper I would like to examine and compare the way in which both novels proceed with reconstructing or constructing anew the archives of biography, balancing between the objective and the subjective, the public and the personal, the authentic and the fictitious. I have decided to examine works by Byatt and Swift, for both writers frequently explore the theme of transhistorical bonds between the past and present and focus on the place of individuals encapsulated or, at times, entrapped in the temporal and spatial network of history, literature, and culture. I will concentrate solely on biography as yet another possible form of collecting and storing facts about an individual, without discussing other aspects and themes of the two novels. For the sake of clarity and coherence, my analysis will be mostly textual with particular regard to the figures of the narrators—biographers who initiate and organise the whole process of reconstruction, filter the presented events and recollected memories through their sensibility, and value these memories according to their personal hierarchy of importance.

Both novels are narrated in the first person; hence, the reader must rely solely on his subjective memory and the narrator's way of perceiving the presented events. 'You have no means of comparison and only my word to go on', directly states Bill at the opening of his tale.⁴ In *Ever After*, the narration is strongly personal with an abundance of flashbacks, digressions, and recurrent phrases such as, 'It seems to me...', 'I think...', 'I will come to all this'. This blurring the borderlines between what is authentic and what is imagined is especially apparent when Bill evokes a picture of Paris, where he spent his childhood. 'When I try to remember the glorious, the marvellous, the lost and the luminous city of Paris, I find it hard to separate the city that exists in the mind, that existed even then, perhaps, mainly in my mind, from the actual city whose streets I once trod'.⁵ Reminiscences of adolescence coexist with recent memories, overlapping and intertwining with the lives of other family members as well as with current historical, political, and social events, forming a complex and ever-changing archive of memory. In *The Biographer's Tale*, the narration is also subjective but decidedly less emotional, proceeding chronologically—even methodically—in its attempts to explore the arcana of an ideal biography. It is interesting to notice how the protagonist explains his preference for narrating the events directly: 'I am writing in the first person for the sake of precision, because this procedure allows me to say certain things I am reasonably sure of'.⁶ This somewhat naive opinion—especially when juxtaposed with Bill's awareness that direct narration enables one to manipulate with the apparent solidity, objectivity, and impartiality of presented events, because 'we see only what we are pleased to see'⁷—presents Phineas's search for pure facts as a sort of biographer's *Blidungsroman*. His search is an intellectual journey from an innocent belief in 'the shining *solidity* of a world full of facts'⁸ towards a mature acceptance of the shifting boundaries between facts and fiction and the fragmentary, composite nature of any human life. The discrepancy between what is expected and what is eventually found, as well as constant disappointment accompanying his strenuous task, are the recurrent feelings that Phineas experiences. The house in which Destrý-Scholes was born turns out to be an ordinary, indistinguishable red brick segment instead of 'a substantial house, a house with an orchard, or anyway a big garden,

where an imaginative boy might play, a house with gables and dormer windows' that the young scholar expected.⁹ Yet another disillusionment is brought by the discovery of Scholes's suitcase of personal belongings found by his niece. 'I had hoped for heaps of documents—letters, drafts of further instalments of the lives of the personages—but there was nothing'.¹⁰ Phineas's random pursuit, full of inconsistencies and disruptions instead of the presupposed chronological, coherent accumulation of facts juxtaposed with Bill's unconstrained balancing between authenticity and imagination, might be read as a literary illustration of Michel Foucault's notion of discontinuity in *Archaeology of Knowledge*. As he remarks,

history in its classical form, the discontinuous was both the given and the unthinkable: the raw material of history, which presented itself in the form of dispersed events [...]; which, through analysis, had to be rearranged, reduced, effaced in order to reveal the continuity of events. Discontinuity was the stigma of temporal dislocation that it was the historian's task to remove from history. It has now become one of the basic elements of historical analysis.¹¹

Especially at the initial stage of his search for Destry-Scholes, Phineas is primarily preoccupied with imposing an order on the haphazard and scarce collection of facts that he possesses, striving to push the inevitable issue of a somewhat natural discontinuity of life into oblivion. Phineas, therefore, represents the classical approach to history that Foucault details, as opposed to the more modern attitude of Bill, who overtly accepts the intermittent, chaotic nature of life, and for whom 'the fiction of life (if that is what it is) may as well serve as the fact'.¹²

In both novels, the accounts presented by Phineas and Bill are but framework narratives comprising a number of other narrators and stories into multilayered, intricate Chinese-box structures. In *Ever After*, yet another first-person narrator is Matthew Pearce, whose notebooks—being an autobiographical record of his life—become a starting point for Bill's half-factual, half-imagined biography of his ancestor. 'What do I know of Matthew? I conjure him up, I invent him. I make him the protagonist [...] of this "dramatised version". I drag him into the light. He might have been no more than the bland words on a mossy gravestone'.¹³ Other stories brought to the surface from the depths of memory concern the relationship of Bill's parents; his mother's second

marriage; the life and suicidal death of Bill's beloved actress wife; or the life lot of Potter, Bill's academic colleague, 'pieced together from hearsay and conjecture'.¹⁴ Each tale is a sort of biography, a subjective reconstruction of life and, mostly, death. Bill realises that the events he narrates may lack impartiality, chronological coherence, and completeness of facts. For instance, Bill's knowledge of the story of his family comes solely from his mother's accounts. 'I am repeating now what she told me',¹⁵ he states, emphasising the probability of encountering factual inaccuracies and biased opinions in his narrative. He continues, 'All this she told me in the early stages of her illness—not, if I have given that impression, on that final evening [...]. Though when silence struck, I could not help wondering—I still wonder—whether she had quite got round to saying all she intended'.¹⁶ The need for reconstructing the bits and pieces into a coherent whole as well as constructing some parts of the life stories anew is extensively featured in both novels. In *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas gradually becomes aware that instead of gathering the facts about Destry-Scholes as such, he is somehow forced to examine the lives of those whom the eminent biographer once researched. All that he learns about Destry-Scholes is when he was born, how he died, and the subjects of his work. Following the biographer's professional interests, Phineas gains knowledge from a variety of disciplines, which nevertheless does not bring him any closer to Destry-Scholes as a flesh-and-blood person. 'Where would it stop?' he asks, exhausted. 'Linnaeus would lead to Swedenborg, Galton to Darwin, Ibsen to Strindberg or Shaw, and I would run like a ferret from library to library, shelf to shelf. There is no end to the pursuit of knowledge, no limit, no bound'.¹⁷ Hence, since every discovery, sensation, or experience evokes a chain of related associations and connotations, there is also no limit to the process of constructing and collecting the biographical archives of an individual.

The framework narratives in both novels can be also regarded as yet another biographical—or, rather, autobiographical—account directly concerning the lives of both protagonists. Everything that they trace and recollect—and with which they become preoccupied—becomes part of their personal archives of memory. 'I now wonder', muses Phineas towards the inevitable end of his unfulfilled search,

‘whether *all* writing has a tendency to flow like a river towards the writer’s body and the writer’s own experience?’¹⁸ Subjective perception of the outside world, idiosyncratic in every human being, as well as individual ways of ordering the myriad of occurrences and sensations kept in memory allow us to regard the experiences of other people in the light of our own knowledge about the world. ‘People aren’t defined by other people. We have to be ourselves’,¹⁹ asserts Bill, although he himself tends to transpose his point of view and his personal observations onto the narrated events. The story of Matthew Pearce, a sort of alter ego of Bill’s, is retold in parts interchangeably with the reminiscences of the happy marriage of Bill and his wife. ‘I invent. I imagine. I want them [Matthew and his wife, Elisabeth] to have been happy. How do I know they were ever happy?’²⁰ Is it so, therefore, that only what has been experienced directly and not retold, reimagined or recreated, can be known with absolute certainty? An affirmative answer to such a question seems to be obvious but is, nonetheless, deceptive, for any archive of memory is subjective, transitory, and susceptible to modifications by means of new experiences and temporal distance. Carolyn Steedman, while recalling Derrida’s remarks on Freud, psychoanalysis, and archives in her book *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, aptly notices that ‘no storehouse, especially not the psychoanalytic archive of the human psyche, holds the records of an original experience, to which we may return’.²¹ Continuing his reconstruction of Matthew’s marriage life, Bill undermines the truthfulness and objectivity of the content of the notebooks: ‘How do I know that the Notebooks, while they offer ample evidence for the collapse of Matthew’s marriage, were not also a desperate attempt to keep alive its myth?’²²

Similar doubts haunt Phineas, especially when it turns out that Destry-Scholes depicted Carl Linnaeus’s journey to Norway to see the Maelstrom, whereas the great taxonomist never actually went there. This surprising discovery leaves Phineas confused, especially when juxtaposed with Destry-Scholes’s ideas of an ideal biography: ‘A biographer must never claim knowledge of that which he does not know. Whereof we cannot know, thereof must we be silent. You will find that this requirement gives both form and beauty to a good biography. Perhaps contrary to your expectations’.²³ A close affinity

has already developed between Phineas and Destry-Scholes and makes the young biographer irrationally suspect that the deception is directed personally at him. Only later does it come to his mind that ‘the imaginary narrative sprung from the scholarly one, and that the compulsion to *invent* was in some way related to my own sense that in constructing *this* narrative I have had to insert facts about myself [...], my feelings and my interpretations’.²⁴ The process of reconstructing biographical archives is always, therefore, imbued to some extent with the biographer’s personal experience, knowledge, and inner impulse to lurk behind his subject. By investigating other people’s lives, as well as half-consciously, half-involuntarily exercising the power to construct their past, the biographer acquires a possibility of coming to terms with his own life. As Steedman remarks, ‘the past is searched for something [...] that confirms the searcher in his or her sense of self, confirms them as they want to be, and feel in some measure that they already are’.²⁵

The strenuous process of assembling the biographical archive, seemingly unilateral in its engagement of the biographer in resurrecting actively his whatsoever passive subject, allows the biographer and the biographee to enter into a specific, mutual relationship. Not only is the former able to construct and, at times, interfere with the latter’s life; it is also precisely the biographee who, to an extent, reflects and shapes the life of his pursuer. In *Ever After*, tracing and evoking the story of Matthew helps Bill come to terms with his own life. ‘You see’, he explains, ‘it is the personal thing that matters. The *personal* thing. It is knowing who Matthew Pearce *was*’.²⁶ The ambiguity of the adjective ‘personal’ is crucial in the context of adopting a different perspective on one’s life by means of exploring the life of another individual, for the word ‘personal’ may refer both to the biographer when the biographical search is his private, individual concern, as well as to the biographee—putting an emphasis on the particular person whose life is to be assembled out of scattered pieces. Due to the evident correspondence of a number of episodes in both Matthew’s and Bill’s lives—such as the loss of someone close as well as the notorious consciousness of being a part of history—Matthew fulfils a somewhat therapeutic function, helping Bill to order his thoughts and emotions and to see his life from a different angle. As Bill simultaneously retells the story of his family while working

on his ancestor's notebooks, more parallels appear between Bill and his ancestors. Probably the most prominent recollection emphasising these parallels is Bill's portrayal of the relationship between him, his mother, and his stepfather Sam, after his father's suicide: 'There were Sam and my mother [...] and there was I, an adjunct, an accessory, a supernumerary. This had been my father's position. I stood in his vacant place'.²⁷ This sudden analogy between Unwin senior and Unwin junior, as well as Bill's eventual attempt (which was, unlike his father's, an unsuccessful one) at terminating his life for roughly similar reasons to that of his father (that was, broadly speaking, love), becomes yet another instance of shaping the present by the past. In *The Biographer's Tale*, the process of constructing the biographer's life by his subject is even more exposed than in Swift's novel. Phineas's bold decision to abandon the modern critical and theoretical study for biographical research on Destry-Scholes is already the first step to a full-scale transformation of his hitherto monotonous life, involving his rapid education in various disciplines, working part-time in an eccentric travel agency, or having love affairs with two women at a time. All these occurrences are, just as in *Ever After*, paralleled and doubled with the events concerning the biographer's subject(s) directly; however, the analogies are to be found deeper than at the biographer/biographee level. Thus, Phineas's proceedings have their counterparts not in the life of Destry-Scholes, but in the life of Sir Elmer Bole, the subject of Scholes's researches. Bole was a notable Victorian polymath, intellectual, acknowledged translator, intrepid traveller and explorer, and a bigamist who married two women—Turkish and English—and 'in the same year established two households, one in an old red-painted wooden house on the shore of the Bosphorus, and one in the little Old Vicarage at Pommeroy'.²⁸ Curiously enough, the more information that Phineas strives to gather about Destry-Scholes, the more Phineas's life resembles that of Bole, particularly with regards to his relationships with Vera Alphage, Scholes's niece, and Fulla Biefeld, a Swedish bee taxonomist, 'a goddess of the night and a goddess of the daylight'.²⁹ Thus, the overwhelming absence of the persona of Destry-Scholes along with Phineas's eventual failure to compose his biographer's biography raise the question of how *personal* the pursuit for Destry-Scholes was for Phineas.

In both novels, the intense, convoluted, and ephemeral process of assembling the biographical archive is juxtaposed with more traditional and apparently more permanent modes of storing the past, such as national archives, libraries, and museums, in which the protagonists attempt to trace their subjects. The chaotic, random collecting of facts and memories contrasts with the orderly, imperishable structures of the institutional archives, which, as Bill remarks while contemplating the university library, 'will continue to stand so—with all those books, all that compacted civilisation still safe inside—when the fragile colleges and tranquil lawns are no more'.³⁰ This contrast helps to show what Jacques Derrida interestingly observes in his *Archive Fever*, that 'the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable contents'.³¹ Thus, it is precisely the shape of the archive, regarded as a physical object or in more abstract terms, that determines the shape of everything that is stored in the archive as well as the subsequent proceedings of the person who wishes to explore it. Reconstructing the biographical archives becomes, therefore, largely dependent on and substantially formed by the source of the collected and subsequently transmuted information, with the biographer as a key vehicle of retrieving and enlivening the desired bits of the past. As Leon Edel notes in his book *Literary Biography*, a biographer embarking on the biographical quest 'enters a labyrinth, the exit of which he cannot know. At the beginning his great worktable is comparatively bare. Long before he has emerged from the maze it will be cluttered with more material than he can ever use; or it may remain so bare that he has virtually no story to tell—save a tale of general bafflement'.³²

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Endnotes

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12. Swift, p. 160.
13. Swift, p. 145.
14. Swift, p. 80.
15. Swift, p. 27.
16. Swift, p. 30. Italics mine.
17. Byatt, p. 120.
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19. Swift, p. 213.
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23. Byatt, p. 39.
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