

**The Ghosts of the Past: Alfred Tennyson's Life Story  
in A. S. Byatt's "The Conjugal Angel"**

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**Abstract:** *The following paper concentrates on the second novella in A. S. Byatt's Angels and Insects, and it aims at showing that an attempt to reconstruct a person's life and to recapture the past might remind of occult practices, or conjuring up the ghosts. A similarity between a biographer and a spiritualistic medium is indicated: both are provided only with scraps of information, on the basis of which they try to construct a coherent story. Both in the case of biography and reading the messages from the other world, a large dose of imagination is necessary to construct a plausible interpretation of the incomplete data. "The Conjugal Angel" seems to imply that any attempt to read the life of a poet from his verse or letters must be futile, because even if connected with real events, poetry might "encode" them producing a cipher incomprehensible even for the poet himself, as his subconscious emotions might have gone into his creation. Similarly, the messages from the spirits tend to be rather obscure, or adulterated by the consciousness of the medium. An additional problem might be a deliberate distortion of facts either by "malicious spirits" or by Great People guarding their privacy. Consequently, both messages from the dead and biographical works are necessarily fictitious.*

The ancient heritage of biography can be accounted for by natural human admiration for Great People as well as by an attempt to make them, in a way, immortal. These "primary urges to celebrate, commemorate, and immortalize, the impulse of life against death" have been "among the chief motives for writing lives" (Parke.2002: 2). The drive to write lives, evident in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* or medieval hagiography, seems to have grown in intensity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which gave birth to such eminent biographers as John Dryden and Samuel Johnson<sup>1</sup>. Neither did it slacken in the nineteenth century, although, as some critics indicate, due to Victorian ideas of respectability the genre in the Victorian Age might be perceived as devoid of Johnsonian vitality, becoming merely "muffled, lifeless, distractingly

detailed compilations of sanitised facts or portraits of improbable goodness" (ibid: 20)<sup>2</sup>. Still, the Victorian Age produced a number of outstanding biographies, including J. G. Lockhart's biography of Sir Walter Scott<sup>3</sup>, Elizabeth Gaskell's life of Charlotte Brontë or the works of Andrew Lang<sup>4</sup>.

Although writing lives and writing history proper have been differentiated, the distinction going back to Plutarch (ibid: 15), they nevertheless seem to have similar methods and similar aims. The success of the two genres depends to a large extent on the skilful use of documents, letters, or diaries. Both historians and biographers aim ultimately at discovering the truth, either about past events or about people. Indeed, the nineteenth century seemed to be quite positive as regards the possibility of discovering the truth in both cases. Hayden White (1973: 136) indicates in his *Metahistory* that assuming "scientific" methods in writing history was to ensure its objectivity and accuracy. Similarly, the truth about a Great Man is a professed aim of a biographer. For Andrew Lang (1986: 10), for example, as Marysa Demoor assures, the main incentive to write a biography was to "present the reader with the truth, no matter how much that truth was hurting him."

The question of the truth about the past, then, lies at the heart of biography. It is also one of concerns in the second novella in A. S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects*, which is the subject of this paper. "The Conjugal Angel" is not, strictly speaking, a biography. However, it deals with problems central to the genre: the ways of learning the truth about Great People. In the novella, the life of Emily Tennyson Jesse is haunted by the memory of her dead fiancé, Arthur Hallam. While trying to communicate with him during spiritualistic séances and reading old letters or *In Memoriam*, she ruminates on the past and tries to find out the truth about Hallam, his relations with herself and with Alfred Tennyson. However, as A. S. Byatt seems to indicate in her story, the truth is irrecoverable, either by communication with the spirits or through an apparently more rational biographical research. What is more, the fragmentary information that a biographer might be faced with appears to be implicitly compared with the cryptic messages that the characters of "The Conjugal Angel" receive from the world of spirits.

The following paper is concerned, generally speaking, with the problem of discovering truth about Great People, or rather the sheer hopelessness of this task. Its aim is to show that writing biography might resemble conjuring up "old ghosts", as Tennyson put it in an unpublished sonnet (Tennyson, H. 1898: I, xi). In either case only incomplete data are provided, and a large dose of imagination is necessary to construct a

plausible interpretation. Moreover, "The Conjugal Angel" seems to imply that any attempt to read the life of a poet from his verse or letters must be futile, because even if connected with real events, poetry might "encode" them producing a cipher incomprehensible even for the poet himself, as his subconscious emotions might have gone into his creation. Similarly, the messages from the spirits tend to be rather obscure, or adulterated by the consciousness of the medium. An additional problem might be a deliberate distortion of facts either by "malicious spirits" or by Great People guarding their privacy. Consequently, both messages from the dead and biographical works are necessarily fictitious.

The title of this paper might be a little misleading, in a manner of postmodern novels. "The Conjugal Angel" does not, in fact, recount the story of Tennyson's whole life, concentrating rather on his friendship with Hallam and his mourning after Hallam's death. Neither is Tennyson the central figure in the novella: he has to share the reader's attention with other characters, especially his sister, Emily Jesse. Tennyson's grief is here juxtaposed with Emily's anguish and feeling of guilt after she has proved unable to remain a "dedicated nun" subsequent to her fiancé's death ("The Conjugal Angel", 218). Still, although mixed with pure fiction, some facts of Tennyson's life (at least as they are narrated in Hallam Tennyson's *Memoirs*) are employed in the text, even if distorted or changed to suit the needs of the story<sup>5</sup>.

The problem of truth and fiction, which is of such significance in "The Conjugal Angel", recurs in any discussion on biography. Virginia Woolf, in her *Orlando*, somewhat ironically indicates that "the first duty of a biographer" is to "plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads" (1998: 46). The question of whether invention, or departure from the truth, is or is not permissible has always plagued biographers. *Orlando* itself is a fictional biography<sup>6</sup>; Henry James actually believed that "only fiction could capture the otherwise elusive qualities of life" (Parke 2002: 19)<sup>7</sup>; and the so-called New School of biography<sup>8</sup> "delighted in fictionalising biography – interpolating long imaginary conversations and pretending to crawl inside an author's mind to tell us what went on there" (Dodd 1950: 198)<sup>9</sup>. In fact, the genre "has always had the doubtful status of a maverick or mongrel art" (Holmes 1995: 15)<sup>10</sup> and it results from a marriage of fact and fiction:

The problematic, delightful, and disputed nature of biography derives from its original first forbears, who one secret, sultry morning formed an Unholy Alliance. Fiction married Fact, without benefit of clergy. Or as I prefer to

say, Invention formed a love-match with Truth. These are the Adam and Eve of our subject. The result was a brilliant, bastard form – Biography – which has been causing trouble ever since (Holmes 1995: 15).

The above quotation underlines a fictional aspect of *any* biography. Thus, a biography depends to a large extent on invention, as the title of Holmes' article, "Biography: Inventing the Truth" clearly indicates. Moreover, all other problems of writing lives are, in one way or another, connected to this essential question of truthfulness.

This is what both Alfred Tennyson and his son Hallam apparently knew. In fact, Hallam Tennyson begins the *Memoir* with his father's unpublished sonnet, which expresses doubt in the possibility of discovering the whole truth about history and, in particular, about a man's life:

Old ghosts whose day was done ere mine began,  
 If earth be seen from your conjectured heaven,  
 Ye know that History is half-dream – ay even  
 The man's life in letters of the man.  
 There lies the letter, but it is not he  
 As he retires into himself and is:  
 Sender and sent-to go to make up this,  
 Their offspring of this union. And on me  
 Frown not, old ghosts if I be one of those  
 Who make you utter things you did not say,  
 And mould you all awry and mar your worth;  
 For whatsoever knows us truly, knows  
 That none can truly write his single day,  
 And none can write it for him upon earth (Tennyson, 1898: I, xi).

Therefore, it is hardly possible to translate experience faithfully into letters, which implies also essential discrepancy between real life and written life. History and the history of a man in particular, is "half-dream", the poet indicates, and therefore, like dreams, it is only partially dependent on facts. Interestingly enough, in the poem there is a reference to "old ghosts" who are asked for forgiveness if the poet should "make [them] utter things [they] did not say" and "mould [them] all awry." Although the poem speaks of the ghosts metaphorically, it nevertheless might be interpreted as pointing to a similarity between a historian or, even more so, a biographer, and conjuring up the ghosts during a spiritualistic séance. The poet (or biographer) conjures the ghosts of the dead when he gives them life in his poetry, but he can only give them the life he imagines they had. Therefore, he is much like a spiritualistic

medium, who interprets the figures she or he sees to the other participants of a séance.

However, although the poem at the beginning of Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir* seems to suggest that he is sceptical about the possibility of ever learning the whole truth of what his father had been, the reader is informed in the next sentence that:

besides the letters of my father and of his friends there are his poems, and in these we must look for the innermost sanctuary of his being. For my own part, I feel strongly that no biographer could so truly give him as he gives himself in his own works; but this may be because, having lived my life with him, I see him in every word which he has written (ibid).

Therefore, he seems to indicate that Tennyson's personality and his life is "encoded" in his poetry, and that it is through his poetry that he can be known. Indeed, although "the major Victorian poets and novelists tended to make art of their experiences by reporting them obliquely", they still are believed to reveal themselves in their writing. *In Memoriam*, for instance, could be described as autobiographical (Peltason 1999: 361). However, it could also be read as a particular kind of biography of Hallam, as Tennyson's desire was much like a desire of a biographer: to immortalise his friend.

The belief that it is possible to read Tennyson's (and Hallam's) life from *In Memoriam* is shared by characters of A. S. Byatt's "Conjugal Angel". Mrs Emily Jesse, for example, claims that her brother "diffused everything so fast into poetry" ("The Conjugal Angel", 226, original emphasis), suggesting that his experience was transformed into verse. If it was, however, it still required reading between the lines, as it was never told directly. Nevertheless, paradoxical as it might seem, she can learn about Hallam and her brother even better from the poems than she could ever hope to learn about them when they all lived together. It is because the male world was closed to her:

She did not know what men made of women when they talked of them. Conventionally, it was believed that they had different and higher topics to engage them. ... she remembered the sight of those two male backs, those two pairs of eagerly climbing legs, going up to the attic with the white beds, with the sensations of one excluded from Paradise ("The Conjugal Angel", 226-227).

It was a mystery to her what they really felt or what the subjects of their conversation were. She could only guess what they talked about by interpreting the voices she heard, as she

caught the echoes of the indecipherable flow of words, the ruminative grumble, the quick, decisive leaping voice. From time to time she could hear recitation. The 'Ode to a Nightingale'. 'On a Grecian Urn'. 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness' – she knew the words, she could add the rest ("The Conjugal Angel", 227).

Thus, although she knew both Tennyson and Hallam intimately, her data were nevertheless incomplete. She was denied a glimpse into this male world, just like a biographer might be denied access to thoughts and feelings of the subject of his work. She only hears the voices, distant and muffled as if coming from another world, which reminds of a medium listening to the raps and noises made by spirits.

However, contrary to Hallam Tennyson's (or biographical critics') assumptions, poetry (but also letters, diaries etc.) is only an imperfect source of information about a poet. As Richard Holmes indicates, all sources are "inherently unreliable" for the simple reason that

[m]emory itself is fallible; memoirs are inevitably biased; letters are always slanted towards their recipients; even private diaries and intimate journals have to be recognised as literary forms of self-invention rather than an 'ultimate' truth of private fact or feeling (Holmes 1995: 17).

Also Tennyson's unpublished sonnet quoted earlier indicates, "none can truly write his single day". In fact, written materials, including poetry, reveal as much as they hide: whereas poetry offers Mrs Jesse a glimpse into the nature of the friendship between the two men, it also presents Tennyson with a way of describing his feelings and passions "obliquely". The Tennyson in "The Conjugal Angel" sees poetry as a kind of disguise:

He was doubly cloaked, now, in the distracted vagueness of genius and in the thick cloak of the respectability of his Age, of which he has somehow or other become an exemplary citizen ("The Conjugal Angel", 258).

Thus, his poems enabled him to shape other people's vision of himself and to cover up his trail. Seen through the prism of his writing (be it poetry or letters) the figure of the poet is necessarily incomplete, and is

therefore the more mysterious and blurry, like a spirit in a spiritualistic séance.

The problem of unreliability of sources is additionally aggravated by the fact that some significant letters, notes etc. might have been lost or even deliberately destroyed<sup>11</sup> for fear that they might get into possession of an indiscreet biographer. Tennyson must have shared the Victorian reverence for privacy, the fact to which A. S. Byatt refers in "The Conjugal Angel". There are a number of examples of great Victorian personae who deliberately burnt their correspondence. Marysa Demoor indicates that it is paradoxical that "at a time of intense proliferation of biographies, so many eminent Victorians deliberately destroyed their personal papers and letters even though some were biographers themselves" (1986: 9). Such reverence for privacy and abhorrence of scandal induced the Victorians to take their secrets to the grave. Moreover, the relatives of famous people might also refuse to share their secrets with biographers, and defend their loved ones from being "picked by vultures" to use the words of a fictional character in A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (443)<sup>12</sup>.

Tennyson's desire to keep the secrets of his life unknown seems evident. First of all, as the *Memoir* certifies, he bid his son to be his biographer, as if to prevent other people from spying into his private affairs. Although Hallam Tennyson claims that he quoted "from many manuscripts never meant for the public eye", at the same time he indicates that he burnt many of them according to the instruction of his father (1898: I, xv-xvi). This was the fate of letters from Tennyson to Arthur Hallam, destroyed after Hallam's death. Hallam Tennyson remarks that it was "a great loss, as these particular letters probably revealed his inner self more truly than anything outside his poems" (1898: I, 71). Similarly, although he includes in the *Memoir* extracts from letters by his father to Emily Sellwood, he nevertheless indicates that "[he had] not felt able to include many passages which would show the intensity of feeling expressed in these letters, but [had] burnt the correspondence according to [his] father's directions" (1898: I, 167). Moreover, he refrains from passing his own comments or judgements, as the wish of his father was that "throughout the memoir [Hallam Tennyson's] hand will be as seldom seen as may be" (1898: I, xvi). It is not surprising, then, that this official and authorised work was criticised by a contemporary biographer, Christopher Ricks, who admits that it is "capacious and honorable, at its best in breathing a sense of what it was like in the immediate vicinity of Tennyson during the second half of his life" but at the same time it is "unfortunately inaccurate, sometimes wilfully so, and is inordinately

reticent" (1972: viii), which results in a rather hazy image that a reader might get of Tennyson.

Moreover, apart from obscuring the truth, Mrs Jesse learns in the novella, poetry can actually distort facts by presenting them in a very subjective way. She believes that the intensity of Tennyson's grief expressed in *In Memoriam* undoes her own suffering after Hallam's death. By stressing the bond between the two men, the poem pushes her into the background:

It was, she knew and said often, the greatest poem of their time. And yet, she thought in her bursts of private savagery, it aimed a burning dart at her very heart, it strove to annihilate her, and she *felt* the pain of it, and could not speak of the pain to a soul ("The Conjugal Angel", 233, original emphasis).

Because by marriage to Captain Jesse she failed the expectations of both the Hallams and Alfred, and thus rather than be a true "heroine of a tragic story" ("The Conjugal Angel", 173) she made a more prosaic choice, she had to disappear from the poems together with her son, Arthur Hallam Jesse, "an awkward living evidence of the failure of perpetual maidenhood" ("The Conjugal Angel", 235). Her role was, at least in the poems, usurped by Alfred Tennyson: "in some curious way, which could be poetic tact, the poem had made Alfred into Arthur's widow ... Alfred had taken Arthur and bound him to himself, blood to blood, bone to bone, leaving no room for her" ("The Conjugal Angel", 234). Paradoxically, such presentation of Alfred both distorts the truth (as it ignores Emily's claim to be Arthur's widow) and gives a clue to the strength of the bond between the two men and invites speculation about its nature.

Therefore, Mrs Jesse's complaint might bring to mind "the impact of 'new questions' about race, class, and sexuality" (Parke 2002: 89) on biography. As Parke and Holmes indicate, postmodern and feminist theories seem to change the ideas about who deserves to be the subject of a biography and privilege what used to be marginal. Interestingly enough, Byatt's novella tries to recapture the feelings of Emily Tennyson Jesse, thus giving her space and voice that she was denied in *In Memoriam* but also in Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir*, where she is only mentioned in reference to her great brother or to enhance the tragedy of Hallam's death. She is merely represented as the tragic figure "dressed in deep mourning, a shadow of her former self, but with one white rose in her black hair as her Arthur loved to see her" (Tennyson, H. 1898: I, 109). Her marriage to Captain Jesse, on the other hand, is hardly ever mentioned.

Disappointed with poetry as a source of the truth, and feeling that "in that poem [*In Memoriam*] she stood accused" ("The Conjugal Angel",

233), Mrs Jesse turned to spiritualistic séances. Her desire to communicate with Arthur Hallam and hear that he forgave her the marriage to Captain Jesse was only surpassed by Mrs Papagay's curiosity about her tragic past. In fact, there is a correspondence between poetry and "automatic writing" or other signs from the spirit world. Learning the truth from the spirits required at least as big a dose of imagination as reading between the lines in poetry. Not unlike poetry, the messages from the other world tend to be rather vague. They are "coded" and have to be "deciphered", that is, put into the form of a coherent narrative. In "The Conjugal Angel" it is Liliás Papagay who embodies the qualities necessary for interpretation of messages from the other world. She is an imaginative woman, although she knows that in her profession excessive imagination must be controlled:

Liliás Papagay was of imagination all compact. In her profession this was a suspect, if necessary, quality, and had to be watched, had to be curbed ("The Conjugal Angel", 163).

Moreover, she is described as "a great weaver of narratives from tenuous threads of looks, words and feelings" ("The Conjugal Angel", 168). Indeed, she makes up stories, and although they might have nothing to do with reality they are none the less interesting for that.

Mrs Papagay liked stories. She spun them from bobbins of gossip or observation; she told them to herself at night, or when walking in the streets; she was tempted constantly to step too far in tittle-tattle in order to receive reciprocal nuggets of other life-lines, other chains of cause and effect ("The Conjugal Angel", 168).

What is more, when she became a widow, she thought of writing stories for a living, which seems to indicate her propensity to invent and to create fictions. Mr Papagay apparently managed to win her love because "like Othello with Desdemona, he entranced her with tales of his deeds and sufferings in faraway places" ("The Conjugal Angel", 168). Therefore, Liliás Papagay is implicitly compared to a biographer who finds pleasure in learning people's secrets and "spinning" stories about them. The séances provided her with an opportunity to learn not only about the dead but also about the living, who shed their usual reserve and revealed their true selves:

She could not bear to sit and gossip of bonnets and embroidery and the eternal servant problem, she wanted *life*. And this traffic with the dead was

the best way to know, to observe, to love the living, not as they were politely over teacups, but in their secret selves, their deepest desires and fears. They revealed themselves to her, to Liliás Papagay, as they would never have done in usual society ("The Conjugal Angel", 171, original emphasis).

Moreover, in the manner of a biographer pondering over fragments of letters and disjointed notes, Liliás is supposed to construct a coherent narrative on the basis of mere scraps of information, loose lines of poems or random fragments of biblical texts or broken sentences, which form the "utterances" of ghosts. At the same time she tries to envisage the lives of other participants of the séances, often resulting in two or three different versions, as when she imagined the marital life of the Hearnshaws ("The Conjugal Angel", 199-201).

Still, séances did not prove to be superior to poetry (letters, diary etc.) as a means of establishing the truth. The messages from the spirit world come to eager listeners contaminated by the mind of the medium<sup>13</sup>, just like history is corrupted by thoughts and feelings of a historian<sup>14</sup>. Liliás Papagay definitely could not free her mind from her own thoughts and make it a medium for the spirits to use:

Mrs Papagay was not good at giving up thinking. Their practice was to sit in silence, composing the circle, holding hands lightly, to join them into one, waiting, passive minds for the spirits to use, to enter, to speak through ("The Conjugal Angel", 189).

In fact, when she conveyed messages from the ghosts, she realized that some of the words that were used were, in fact, the words that she had learnt from her husband:

She supposed it was almost certain that some quirk of her own mind had put Arturo's word into Mrs Hearshaw's Amys' message. But maybe it had been Arturo, telling her he was there ("The Conjugal Angel", 212).

Moreover, just like a biographer or a historian has to recognise authentic documents, Mrs Papagay faces the problem of differentiating truly authentic spirits from malicious ones, who only blur the picture. The multiplicity and variety of materials that the participants of the spiritualistic séances were faced with – riddles, fragments of poems and loose lines of letters or songs – might remind of the materials gathered by a biographer. In order to achieve a coherent and plausible story of a man's life it is necessary to choose from these materials, to select those that are relevant and authentic. In the novella it is Mrs Jesse's superior

discernment that is particularly admired. Emily Jesse, desirous for any information from her dead fiancé as she was, still refuses to be deceived:

They had never succeeded unambiguously in communicating with him [Arthur Hallam] – not even Sophy Sheeky – and Mrs Papagay, a connoisseur of self-deception and vain images, could only admire the integrity with which Mrs Jesse refused squarely to be seduced by simulacra, or peevish spirits, to drive the tables with her own knees or to urge herself and Sophy to greater efforts (“The Conjugal Angel”, 177).

She selects from the great number of messages, some of them making overt references to facts, others more riddle-like. Although she does not choose to share some of the messages she understands with other participants of the séance, she nevertheless proves to be like a good historian refusing to accept unreliable information. The word “selection”, however, implies interpretation: a biographer has to interpret some documents as more important than others, just as Mrs Jesse had to accept some messages and reject others. The problem of choice coupled with the inherent unreliability of sources make it virtually impossible to reconstruct faithfully and objectively the personality of a Great Man. Thus, biographical sources, the remains of the dead, prove to be as unreliable a key to the truth as the evidence of spirits.

A. S. Byatt’s novella does not offer an ultimate truth about either Tennyson or Hallam, or the relationship between them. “The Conjugal Angel” is far from offering any definite answers. Rather, it seems to indicate hopelessness of any attempt to recapture the past completely. A biographer is thus not much different from a spiritualistic medium, as both are trying to recover the knowledge that is buried with the dead. They are only offered loose lines of poetry, random sentences, riddles, or equally elusive and vague scraps of information, fragments of letters and elusive feelings preserved in poems. All these documents of the past are, however, unreliable and they escape the efforts of biographers or historians to pin them down and to form one coherent narrative. Consequently, despite the appearances of objectivity, the almost scientific approach to examining data and an unrelenting effort to discover the truth, biographical research is still akin to the unscientific séances and conjuring up “old ghosts”.

## Notes

1. John Dryden was the author of *Life of Plutarch* (1683), which contains "the earliest, most developed description of the genre in English" (Parke 2002: 14). Dryden's contemporary, Anthony Wood, wrote the first dictionary of authors (1691-1692). Samuel Johnson, on the other hand, wrote a number of biographical works, including the life of Richard Savage (1744), of Sir Thomas Browne (1756), of Roger Asham (1761), and his biographical essays known as *The Lives of the Poets* (1781). His biography was, in turn, written by his friend James Boswell.
2. This is not necessarily universal in the nineteenth century, as there are examples of biographical writing which does not commemorate great personae in this "sanitised" form. One example is the early nineteenth-century *Newgate Calendar*, which concentrates on careers of notorious criminals; another example might be the anonymous *My Secret Life*, an autobiography of pornographic nature.
3. John Gibson Lockhart (1794-1854) also wrote a biography of Robert Burns (1828).
4. Andrew Lang (1844-1912) was a man of letters who tried almost any genre. He wrote a number of biographies, including those of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, John Knox, Jeanne d'Arc, and of Lockhart.
5. Hallam's death, for example, is narrated in a different way in Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir*. Whereas in the novel he is said to have died while he was sitting by the fire with his father and reading ("The Conjugal Angel", 174), the *Memoir* indicates that Arthur's father found him dead when he returned from a walk (Tennyson, H. 1898: I, 105).
6. The way A. S. Byatt employs facts and fiction might remind of other postmodern novels (postmodern biographies), like those written by Peter Ackroyd or Julian Barnes. Peter Jacobs claims that "*Orlando* is a biography in two different ways: it is a biography *à clef*, in which Woolf used all her artistic powers and freedom to (re) shape the life and background of her friend Vita Sackville-West imaginatively; and it is an anti-biography in which the author introduces the voice of the traditional biographer as a handy satirical device" (1986: 37).
7. Fiction and biography are inextricably linked; both the eighteenth and the nineteenth century produced a number of fictional biographies, including text by Daniel Defoe or Victorian *Buildungsromans*.
8. That is modernists who rejected the traditional Victorian approach to biography; Lytton Strachey or Virginia Woolf could be seen as the main representatives.
9. Similarly, ancient histories very often incorporated imaginary speeches of great people.
10. Interestingly enough, in A.S. Byatt's *Biographer's Tale*, the protagonist remarks: "I had always considered biography a bastard form, a dilettante pursuit. Tales told by those incapable of true invention, simple stories for those incapable

of true critical insight. Distractions constructed by amateurs for lady readers who would never grapple with *The Waves of The Years* bit like to feel they had an intimate acquaintance with the Woolfs and with Bloomsbury, from daring talk of semen on skirts to sordid sexual interference with nervous girls. A gossipy form" (*The Biographer's Tale*, 5). He implies, then, that a biographer is a person of deficient imagination. Needless to say, he changes his mind in the course of the novel.

11. A.S. Byatt's *Possession* is based on the motif of lost letters between two Victorian poets, Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Ash. Byatt seems to be fascinated by great mysteries that lie behind the apparently respectful lives of Victorian people. She seems to imply that contemporary people can only know a part of the Victorian lives, for the simple reason that they either hid or destroyed their letters, and if they wrote diaries they might have done it only "to baffle" (*Possession*, 220).

12. Another problem that Holmes enumerates is the question of ethics, which could be brought down to the question of whether or not the biographer has a right to pry into another person's life, even if the person is long dead and buried, and bring to light the sordid details. This is also, fundamentally, the question of truthfulness of biography. Many biographers, not unlike contemporary paparazzi, were ready to do anything to debunk the image their subject created for the benefit of the public, and would search for the subject's "true self" in private letters or notes.

13. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto indicates that the innocence (that is simplicity and lack of education) of the medium was particularly valued; the message coming from the educated and worldly medium might be contaminated by his knowledge (1999: 78).

14. A historian and a biographer, born and brought up in a given historical period, can never successfully forget the knowledge of their own times to put themselves into position of people whose lives they describe.

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