



Metabiography in Marina Warner's Fiction

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

The postmodern features of English fiction like fragmentation and metafictionality seem to find an equivalent in life writing and metabiography. Such instances of metabiography either expose the protagonist in the process of writing a biography or memoir, and/or include extracts of life writings which are textually incorporated in their original format. The aim of this paper is first to explore the intellectual background of metabiography. It will then closely study the structural characteristics of metabiography as an in-built theme within Marina Warner's two novels; *In a Dark Wood* and *The Lost Father*. I will mainly focus on the narrative techniques of metabiography such as the multiplicity of text-levels, plot "collage" and increased narrator-reader intimacy. This exploration will, on the one hand, highlight the generic myths related to both fiction and life writing which are deconstructed in the process. On the other hand, the metabiographical aspects of these novels will be related to the postmodernist views of reality, history and representation which they reflect, thus revealing postmodern women's fiction's interest in testing the limits of its generic boundaries with non-fictional life writing.

ABSTRACT IN ARABIC

"المينا سيرة" في روايات مارينا وارنر
سهير زكري

ملخص
إن خصوصيات الرواية البريطانية لفترة ما بعد الحداثة والمتمثلة في التجزئة النصية والأدب القصصي انعكاسي الذات يبدو أنها نجد مرادفات لها في السيرة الذاتية بصفة عامة

وانعكاسية الذات بصفة خاصة. تتمثل "المينا سيرة" في كشف منهجية بطل الرواية وهو بصدد كتابة سيرة أو مذكرات تارة، أو/و في إدماج مقتطفات من أصناف مختلفة من السير التي تندمج مع النص محافظة على بنيتها الأصلية تارة أخرى. تهدف من خلال هذا المقال أولاً إلى تبيين الخلفية الفكرية للمينا سيرة، وثانياً، إجراء فحص مدقق للخصوصيات البنوية للسيرة الذاتية أو "للمينا سيرة" كموضوع مدمج في روايتي مارينا وارنر "وسيط غاب مظلم" و "الأب المفقود". سأركز في هذا المقال خاصة على تقنيات السرد في "المينا سيرة" مثل تعدد المستويات النصية وحبكة الرواية المبنية على طريقة الفن التصفيقي وازدياد العلاقة الحميمة بين الراوي والقارئ. سيسلط هذا الاستكشاف الضوء وفي الوقت نفسه يفكك العديد من حقائق النوع الأدبي الوهمية والمتعلقة بالأدب القصصي ومختلف أنواع السير الذاتية. ومن جهة أخرى، سيتم ربط الجوانب الخاصة لهذا الصنف الأدبي الموجودة في هذه الروايات بما تعكسه هي الأخرى من رؤى ما بعد الحداثة المتعلقة بالواقع والتاريخ والتمثل. سيتوضح من خلال ذلك اهتمام الأدب القصصي النسوي لما بعد الحداثة باختبار حدود النوع الأدبي الذي يشترك في بعض خصوصياته مع السير الذاتية غير خيالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الميتاسيرة، السير الذاتية، الأدب النسوي، السرديات.

Keywords: metabiography, life writing, narratology, women's fiction.

At this time I had a recurrent dream of a man trapped in a glass bottle, itself roughly formed in the shape of a man. Sometimes it was blue, sometimes green, sometimes clear with a yellowish cast and flaws in the glass. This man was and was not myself. I was also the observer of the events of the dream. (Byatt, *Biographer's Tale* 29)

When the biographer lets the reader into the most intimate parts of his/her biographical craft through fiction, the conventions of life writing are exposed and expanded to a more self-conscious genre: metabiography. This concept was defined by Ira Bruce Nadel as a genre in which "biographers ... locate themselves as a character within the text" (141). In other words, the biographical mechanisms of life writing are witnessed from within as well as from without the text thanks to the double perspective of the biographer as a participant narrator.

Metabiography thus self-reflexively tackles the theme of biographical research so all the structural and thematic elements of life writing turn into processes to be analyzed, questioned and assessed by both biographer and reader. Indeed, such issues as fact-gathering and selection, coherence, the nature of the past, the biographer's impartiality as well as his/her relationship to the subject become the focus of a self-conscious text. The biographer, who is at the same time the narrator, tells the story of the laborious steps of biographical research in his/her attempt to attain the difficult aim of reconstructing the past in a way as to reflect as truthful a portrait of the biographee as possible.

In postmodern fiction, the *mise en abîme* technique of biographies, diaries, letters and memoirs means that different types of life writing are incorporated within the novel and intrude upon its structural organization while keeping their original format. The structural aspects of the *mise en abîme* technique are reflected in different subtexts which co-exist within, and interact with, the main narrative. Merle Tönnies describes this alternation as “stratification of narrative levels” or “embedded narrative levels [which] infiltrate [the] text” and “overlaps between the different ontological levels ... always likely to collapse into each other” (74–75, 58). The “first-level” text narrates and advances the plot of biographical research. This level also describes the sequence of the biographer’s ideas and methodology, his reasoning about the subject or biography in general, and some procedures such as text-editing.

The “second-level” or “stream-of-consciousness” text consists of comments, digressions, even interruptions on the part of the narrator, which are addressed, sometimes in an autobiographical or diary-like fashion, to him/herself and to an imagined reader. A “third-level” text, constituted of diaries, letters or official documents related to the biographee, is added in Marina Warner’s *In a Dark Wood* and *The Lost Father*, allowing original sources and materials to “speak for themselves” and be unmediated, at least in appearance. As a consequence, different kinds of thematic and structural myths related to life writing are deconstructed. Metabiography also accentuates a more direct relationship with the reader. No longer considered an implied spectator, the latter is included as a participant in the biographical process by being let into the biographer’s thoughts and uncertainties through the mediation of a third-person narrator, as is the case in Warner’s fiction.

In this article, I will first trace the evolution of the genre of metabiography, then I will analyze its main characteristics, its structural and thematic effects on Warner’s novels, and its implications for postmodern women’s fiction.

METABIOGRAPHY: AN INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

While Leon Edel’s *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* (1984) provides a generalized poetics of biography, more thorough biographical criticism had already been developing within the context of early twentieth-century biography such as Harold Nicolson’s *The Development of English Biography* (1929) and André Maurois’ *Aspects of Biography* (1927) (Edel 38), in parallel with the progress of human sciences like anthropology and Freudian psychology. Edel himself is in fact so influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis in particular that he emphasizes its importance to life writing

throughout his book, profusely relying, consciously or unconsciously, on its terminology by using such terms as “transference,” “alter ego” and “life pattern.” While drawing attention to the shortcomings and oversights of previous biographers, especially regarding the ambiguous relationship between biographer and subject, Edel states his own “*principia*” (26), insisting upon the importance of psychology to the understanding of the subject’s personality and the necessary balance between involvement and detachment for the biographer “[t]he best, I think, that a biographer can do is to cultivate his awareness and to recognize the constant threat that ‘involvement’ represents to his objectivity. He may then work a little less blindly and ignorantly” (63). Edel’s realization through the issue of “transference” that every biography is, unconsciously and unintentionally, the biographer’s life story, an autobiography in disguise, paves the way for an increasingly (self-)conscious type of biographical writing.

Also encouraging experiment in biography, Edel quotes Lytton Strachey’s prefatory biographical “advice” at length with regards to what would, through *Eminent Victorians* (1918), set the tone for the advent of “New Biography” and “psychobiography.” Characterized by its reaction against the Victorian conventions of biographical writing, this type of biography should attempt, in Strachey’s words, to carefully select, capture “fragments of the truth,” and “lay bare the facts ... as he [the biographer] understands them” (*Eminent* 10). In other words, he favors brevity and the biographer’s imaginative interpretation over the accumulation of “uninterpreted” (Strachey, “New History” 20) facts, at times going as far as to provide the reader with – the narrative illusion of accessing – the subject’s interior monologues. As a result, the ambiguous relationship between fact and fiction as well as biographer and biographee is highlighted, and biography’s pretension of totality and objectivity is destroyed. At a time when Victorian biography and its unquestioned factual authority was agonizing, Strachey implied the need to probe, pierce and *finish* it with “the torch of the imagination” (“New History” 21), a penetrating exploration made possible by “dramatising the conflict ... between art and biography” (Marcus 108), by thematizing the biographical enterprise and processes. What Strachey’s biographical innovations allow, without totally destroying the importance of factuality and moral detachment, is the coming closer of biography and the novel, especially in terms of narrative techniques. Edel explains “what I am proposing is that the biographer borrow some of the techniques of fiction without lapsing into fiction” (202).

In parallel, Virginia Woolf has recreated the relation between fact and fiction and deconstructed the history versus fiction binary opposition through her fictional biographies, her comments on the “New Biography” and her concept of the “creative fact.” Woolf indeed calls for a careful

mixture of fact and fiction in the writing of biography and strives to “deflate the pretensions of the form” (Anderson 91), a difficult task she undertakes in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). This pioneering work dramatizes and satirizes the conventional metaphors linked to Victorian biography such as memorials, “monstrous erection[s],” veils and draperies which reflect such duties of biographers as decorum, truth-telling and fact-accumulation (Marcus 121–22). Woolf also chooses a living subject for her “biography,” Vita Sackville-West, stretches her lifespan to three hundred years and transforms her gender from a man to a woman (Marcus 117) thus mocking the basic principles of the biographical genre. *Orlando* is, in Edel’s words, a fictional theorizing of a “freer kind of biography ... cut loose from facts” (206).

On the other hand, in “The Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer,” John Worthen, a D.H. Laurence biographer, proclaims the failure of the concise “New Biography” (what he calls “a post-nineteenth-century biography” (234)), and the “increasing” force, between the seventies and the nineties, of the omniscient, lengthy, “definitive and comprehensive” (228) Victorian biography. He associates this failure with the unfading need, on the part of both biographers and readers, for a narrative consistency which camouflages biographical gaps and ignorance, what I term the illusion of seamlessness. In *Biography: Writing Lives*, Catherine N. Parke also deplores the same failure but blames the biographers, especially self-proclaimed Stracheans and Freudians who overindulge in “heavy-handed iconoclasm and crude gossip” or simplistic and ill-advised use of psychology (28). The latter produce poor quality biographies which distort the life and the genre. The question is whether Victorian biography and its values have ever truly disappeared or been “vanquished.” Most importantly, if the “New Biography” has failed to shed the burden of the Victorian one in literary and “real-life” biographies, has it been attempting to do so through metabiography and fictionalization by being more honest and exposing its limitations? Worthen praises at some point Claire Tomalin’s biographical “courage and good sense” (242) through her metabiographical comments in Ellen Ternan’s life, honestly acknowledging the limitations and possible wrongness of her speculative account. However, the need for coherence and for the illusion of factual authority is inexhaustible, turning fictionalized metabiography into “New Biography’s” disguised weapon.

Still, all champions of “New Biography” have deconstructed the binary oppositions on which life writings and auto/biographical paradigms are founded, namely fact versus fiction, detachment versus involvement, and appearance versus reality, purporting that the self and life of the subject are not stable and fixed entities awaiting revelation. In *Marxism and*

Literature, Raymond Williams comments on the necessary destruction of these oppositions because they are unrealistic and limit the possibilities of life writings:

the extreme negative definition of ‘fiction’ (or of ‘myth’) – an account of ‘what did not (really) happen’ – depends, evidently, on a pseudo-positive isolation of the contrasting definition, ‘fact.’ Both these definitions leave out the range of propositions and modulations involved in any understanding of reality ... a definition which denies the overlap and ‘community’ between so-called fictional and non-fictional prose ... the actual multiplicity of writing. (146–9)

An awareness of these fake and “artificial categories” would legitimize and facilitate the generic crossings of auto/biographies and pave the way for a richer and more varied range of fictionalized auto/biography and other types of life writings. In *Biography: a Brief History*, Nigel Hamilton sums up the various new directions taken by biography since the 1960s in terms of transcending “traditional boundaries” (215): chronology and the fame of the biographee were no longer prerogatives, and, most importantly, fictional biographies such as Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984) opened up the genre to “the multiplicity of possible versions of a life” (219). The biographical pretence of a single and definitive viewpoint was now in ruins.

Feminism also played a role in such generic crossings by women auto/biographers while exposing the marginalization and scarcity of women’s life writings, especially autobiographies, diaries, letters and journals, from an “androcentric” (Marcus 1) life writing tradition and criticism. As a result, generic differentiations between biography and autobiography, especially in relation to issues of (self-) representation and objectivity/subjectivity, were deconstructed:

Very recently – and the impetus has come primarily from feminist critics – the inadequacy of this conceptual divide has been clearly revealed ... showing how autobiography and biography function together. Recounting one’s own life almost inevitably entails writing the life of an other or others; writing the life of another must surely entail the biographer’s identifications with his or her subject, whether these are made explicit or not. (Marcus 273–4)

One “inadequacy” leading to another, many women’s auto/biographies like Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and Colette’s *Sido* put the factuality of life writing into question and included fiction in their works so these:

women autobiographers subvert the 'autobiographical pact' by including problematic or ambiguous signals which trouble rather than confirm the distinction between autobiography and fiction ... The 'fictional' can become the space for ... the trying-out of potentialities and possibilities ... or it can be a way of suggesting how much fiction is involved in all self-representations. (Marcus 280)

These continual crossings of generic conventions paved the way for metabiography as a theme/structure, a self-conscious text which comments on itself. This metabiographical trend starts by narrating and dramatizing the difficulties of biographical research as in Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*. The trend witnesses another generic crossing, when life writing processes, "uninterpreted" biographical material and biographical sketches interfere and are "engrafted" upon novels as in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*.

A historical and intellectual overview of life writing may provide the background for this evolution of metabiography towards a greater degree of self-consciousness. The late 1960s and 1970s marked an increase in biographical and autobiographical criticism and theory, and in the publication of biographies and autobiographies by and about women which were influenced and revalued by second-wave feminism. In fact, the genre witnessed a stronger interest in recreating its own poetics in the absence of a female life writing tradition recognized by male critics and publishers. May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*, published in 1973, was, in Carolyn G. Heilbrun's words, the first female autobiography to truthfully and honestly express what had been forbidden to women "anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life"(13). So instead of a lady-like submissiveness and acceptance of oppression, women auto/biographers found an outlet for their repressed anger, a new voice to express their ambitions and desires through their own auto/biographical narratives and histories. These women's marginalized lives/selves allowed them to build a tradition of their own and to reconcile their private and public lives, gradually destroying internalized myths of a self/less, anonymous femininity.

The "'confessional' text of autobiographical self-revelation" was a dominant form in the 1970s, mainly initiated by feminist theorists like Kate Millet, and which constituted a new form of autobiography. Millet's *Flying* (1974) and *Sita* (1977) may be considered among early signs of metabiography as self-conscious texts. Besides the stream-of-consciousness inherent to the confessional form, there is a "commentary on the efficacy of her journal project as a means of recording 'reality'" (Marcus 279–80), so she acknowledges the inaccuracy and excessive subjectivity of her autobiographical text.

Heilburn suggests new ways of writing women's lives in the light of the latest achievements and discoveries of feminism, namely the uncovering of false representations of femininity and gender roles, and the revival of the psychoanalytic framework. What is important is that the female persona reflected in the auto/biographies be truthfully described even if it does not fit the standards of womanliness established by men and the sham (mostly fictional) lives provided by convention, society and literature such as passivity, nurturance and discretion. New lives had to be written in which women were not represented only in relation to men or any other allegedly superior being, as established by Nancy Chodorow's notion of the female relational self or "self-in-representation," formed through her internalization and interpretation of her relationships with (m)others (Chodorow 137). This notion of a relational identity, and thus relational autobiography, as inherent only to women is later deconstructed by Paul John Eakin in his article "Relational Selves, Relational Lives: The Story of the Story" through his assertion that both male and female selves and their autobiographies are relational (66–7). As a result, Eakin opens new possibilities for the interpretation of autobiography by destroying the binary oppositions resulting from a gendered view of the genre, such as male individualism and narration versus female relationality and fragmentation (74). Moreover, his explanation of "the story of the story" (70–1) as the genesis of another person's biography within "collaborative autobiographies" of the 1980s (73) is later supplemented by Gunnthorun Gudmundsdóttir's own analysis of the "mise-en-abîme" of a parent or parents' biography within the narrator's autobiography and reflect it as "a significant strand in recent life-writing" (183). These relational autobiographies of the 1980s and 1990s signal the democratization of what used to be considered a women's prerogative in Mason's comparative analysis in "The Other Voice." Both critics have referred to this nuanced version of metabiography in which, biography being engrafted upon autobiography, the focus is not so much on the life of the subject or the narrator as on their mutual relationship and its effects on the auto/biographer. As in Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1988), the autobiographical turns into a continuous comment on the biographical and allows for experimentation with the objectivity and chronology of biography (Gudmundsdóttir 211).

This type of metabiography is subtly fictionalized in Marina Warner's *The Lost Father*. In the latter novel, Anna's memoir of her mother/grandfather plays an important role in the construction of her self, identity and personal life story, while Davide's diary is enmeshed in a constant dialectical relation with the life of his wife and sisters. This concept of "story of the story" was previously commented upon in relation to

biography by Edel in *Writing Lives*, in which he encourages the publication of separate books related to the biographical quest itself, an autobiography of the biographer that would prevent the latter's life "to intrude in their particular narrative of the life they have researched" (110). "The story of the story" interestingly turns into metabiographical comments about the craft of biography, the research journeys and composition difficulties, even the detailed methodology behind the "Genesis of a Chapter" of Henry James's life (Edel 237–47).

In fact, Edel's suggestion had not fallen on deaf ears for, as reflected in Anne Thwaite's "Starting Again" (207) and Robert Skidelsky's biographical journey in "Confessions of a Long-Distance Biographer," the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by an increased focus on the biographer and on biography as the life of the biographer instead of the subject, also called "literature of 'quest'" (215). Skidelsky adds that "Biographies were becoming franker, and biographers were becoming more self-conscious about their craft" (24). Indeed, there followed many enchanting stories devoted to the biographical "hunt" for its own sake such as Richard Holmes's *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985). Andrew Motion's "Breaking In" (1992), in addition to Mark Bostridge's *Lives for Sale: Biographers' Tales* (2004) and Hermione Lee's *Body Parts* (2005) constitute additional examples of the genre. Whether through the first-person (Bostridge) or third-person (Lee) narration of biographers' 'sagas,' these works waver between humour and tragedy in their depiction of the lot of difficulties and obstacles (en)countering both biographers and biographees. Such works as these help prevent the confusion between the story of the biographer and the life of his/her subject by building romanticized structural boundaries and fictionalized life writing theories. Besides, the biographer's story is more accessible, does not pretend objectivity, and can still didactically enlighten some aspects of the biographical craft. Although such stories have been marginalized from life writing as a genre, and such "quests have most often been relegated to places outside the biography" (Hibbard 22), the very existence of such compilations constitutes in itself a trend which reflects the readiness for the increased transparency and modesty of metabiography. Derrida's and Barthes's "Death of the Author" articles have also influenced the way these theorists compose their own autobiographies and biographies in which the very existence of the biographical subject as well as the conventional form and structure of the genre are constantly questioned, deconstructed and deferred. But has the biographer ever died or disappeared from his/her text? In *Biography: A Brief History*, Hamilton confirms that, untouched by the violent attack of these French deconstructionists, biography has continued on its merry way as it has always "accepted the instability of definitive factual 'truth'

where people are concerned” (209). Barbara Caine also points out the influence of Barthes’s poststructuralist ideas on the genre in terms of the ‘death’ of the (stable) self which makes questions about biographies and individual lives seem redundant. She then wittily draws attention to his Michelet biography to reinforce the evidence of the undying need for writing about, and understanding lives (Caine 22). But is not metabiography rather about the renaissance of the biographer as shown by the aforementioned biographers’ tales?

The deconstruction of the oral versus written binary opposition was also favored by second-wave feminism and the publication of “transcripts of oral testimonies” relating to marginalized lives flourished (Marcus 281). Such an evolution is important to the concept of metabiography in its reliance on free indirect speech and second-person narration which provide the illusion of orality and immediacy through narrative fluidity. There is a “growing affinity between auto/biography and oral history” (Marcus 274), especially in relation to working-class and colonial life stories being retrieved in the mid-eighties. In “Inventing the Truth,” Richard Holmes explains that only people with great achievements are chosen by biographers “[i]t is pulled, unnaturally perhaps, out of the orbit of the ordinary, the average, the everyday lives that most of us lead and need to understand” (18). In Marina Warner’s fictional metabiography, all subjects and biographers are ordinary, wretched, fallible and fallen. Leto’s and Sycorax’s oral speeches, for example, can be considered as feminist autobiographies, a (self-) representation of those who cannot write because they are analphabetic, possessing a different system of signification. However, it is necessary to note that orality should not be categorized as the exclusive mark of “feminine” discourse, since other women characters in Warner’s fiction reflect the written wor(l)d: Anna is a memoirist in *The Lost Father* and Dr. Fernly an academician in *The Leto Bundle*. Still, Parke has pointed out the importance of autobiography and autobiographical genres to both women and oppressed peoples as a suitable tool for self-expression and the validation of their status/identity as opposed to the way they are represented by patriarchal and dominant discourses (32–4). Warner’s metabiography thus allows ordinary and marginalized subjects and auto/biographers to express themselves through fictional alternatives.

The advent of “personal criticism” at the beginning of the 1990s and its combination of autobiography with feminist theory was also an important step towards metabiography as it marked a move towards (a need for) self-reflexivity through autobiography.¹ In fact, Liz Stanley explains in relation to feminist researchers and critics that, since “all knowledge is autobiographically-located” (“Feminist Autobiography” 210), their

theoretical writings need to be contextualized within their subjective sphere of knowledge and experience (Marcus 287). According to Caine, even historians have done their bit in what she terms “ego-histoire” [ego-history] (84) as the combination of their autobiography and the story of their research. Such a move towards subjectivity could also be applied to the evolution of life writing theory, especially in relation to the biographer’s alleged detachment and objective portrayal of his/her subject and the democratization of the former’s previously hierarchical relationship to both subject and reader.

In 1993, in *French Autobiography*, Michael Sheringham interestingly links the developing views of narrative to those of autobiography “any moves towards a rehabilitation of narrative’s mimetic, heuristic or pragmatic functions are likely to support comparable shifts in the way autobiography is regarded” (23). In other words, if the narrative’s referentiality is put into doubt by postmodernism and post-structuralism, leading to an increased reliance on self-reflexive narratives, it follows logically that a development of metabiographical auto/biography will parallel that of metafictionality. As these controversial aspects of life writing will impose themselves, a need for metabiography will slowly develop “[i]f biography is to have a future, it has to face up to the problems it has inherited” (Holmes 20). Such “problems” are rooted in the very nature of biography: the endless tension between imaginative re-creation and “the ideal of a permanent, historical, and objective document” (Holmes 20). However, as Holmes questions the possibility of biographical authenticity in “Inventing the Truth” (17–18), he does so in a positive light, not considering the biographical constructedness of life as a fatality but as a literary form with “epic possibilities” (24). Combining the “art of human understanding” with the inevitable but enriching mixture of truth and invention, biography thus legitimizes metabiography, a more “honest” form that does not make any pretence, but rather exposes the lack of biographical factuality.

In *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Gudmundsdóttir focuses on Western autobiographical texts of the last thirty years and mentions a “vogue for memoirs and non-fiction ... especially in Britain” (2) and a renewed belief in referentiality since the 1990s (Sheringham/Eakin). This is linked to the *secondary effects* of postmodernism² and the need in the last decade of the twenty-first century for a link, narrative or other, with reality and the outside world. Despite its controversial aspects, referentiality also allows the generic distinction between fictional and non-fictional life writing and its renewed popularity may indicate the chronicle of a death foretold for fictional metabiography.

In her analysis of the various fictional techniques reflected in autobiographical works, Gudmundsdóttir refers to an “autobiographical text where the autobiographer deals actively with the problematics of the writing process itself” (5), especially objectivity and the inextricable relation between life and narrative conventions and devices. Gudmundsdóttir thus provides interesting insights into metabiography in which the autobiographers compose a life story while at the same time commenting on its problematic “formulation” (85). Such metabiographical comments consequently offer to the auto/biographer an additional dimension for self-expression, echoing “personal criticism,” and “can move biography to a different level” of experimentation through a mixture of objective (historical) and subjective (memory) knowledge. On the other hand, despite the recurrent doubts and preoccupations of recent life writing studies about “narrative [as] intrinsic to knowledge” (Gudmundsdóttir 96), the former remains nonetheless necessary for the expression of life and identity. Interestingly, when discussing the different levels of experimentation in life writing, Gudmundsdóttir considers autobiography as a “hybrid” and highly experimental genre while relegating biography to a “positivist genre, with many unexamined assumptions at its core” (185–185). In “Biography in Autobiography,” Gudmundsdóttir has also referred to the metabiographical *mise en abîme* of diaries and letters in real life autobiographies (201), metabiography as a structure, but this “historical approach to biography” (206) does not preclude the partial, “fictional or reinvented element” (Holmes 17) from emerging in these documents.

By attempting to illuminate the compatibility of the fictional and autobiographical modes in recent autobiographical writings (263), it is obvious that Gudmundsdóttir goes beyond poststructuralist doubts about language and representation to reach an acceptance of fiction as intrinsic to autobiography, and by extension to other types of life writing “fiction is not a negative term in autobiography, it does not diminish autobiography’s truth-value, or [its] referential aspects” (273). Fiction is then defined in terms of devices and structure rather than in the sense of invention and imagination. Such an assertion in turn opens up life writing theory to the experimental and hybrid potential of fictional auto/biographies, letters, memoirs and diaries included in novels over the last thirty years as in Warner’s metabiography. These postmodern crossings of genre boundaries mark a return to referentiality but not to positivist thinking through more flexible structures, the acknowledgment of the plurality of life versions and the difficulty of representing the past.

Caine has also mentioned two pertinent changes in biographical practice in relation to history since the 1970s. First, the increased attention to the context and entourage of the biographical subject, linked to a similar

growing concern with the history of women and oppressed groups, is reflected in group biographies and "microhistories" (Caine 111). The second important addition to biography is the metabiographical comments or "reflections" (Caine 121) included in recent biographies.

Postmodern biography has broadened the horizons of both life writing and fiction thanks to their generic "cross-fertilization" (Hamilton 284), valuing non-fictional as much as fictional life writing, besides its acknowledgment of the impossibility of representing reality objectively, which only adds to the liveliness of the debates surrounding it and to its vitality as a twenty-first century genre. In that regard, fictional metabiography is yet to know its apogee.

MARINA WARNER: A MULTIFACETED METABIOGRAPHY

Warner's interest in the past, history and their relationship to the present influences both the structure and content of her fiction; each novel wavering between different spatial and temporal contexts in a constant dialectic. This past/present dichotomy takes the shape of time shifts which are in turn strongly connected to the structural and thematic incorporation or *mise en abîme* of diaries, letters, chronicles and memoirs within the novels. This incorporation stems from Warner's need to reconstitute and understand the past by analysing it through the lenses of the present. These characteristics constitute metabiography which uncovers and takes into consideration different types of life writing and the processes leading to their creation. But what reasons or principles may explain Warner's incorporation of different types of life writing within her novels? The most conspicuous effects of this *mise en abîme* are the fragmented appearance and narratorial variety of the Warnerian text, but what is the link to life writing?

According to Hayden White in his article "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" "[w]e make sense of the real world by imposing on it the formal coherency that we customarily associate with the products of writers of fiction" (1552) as well as biography and autobiography. Reality as expressed earlier in this article is confused, chaotic and illogical, with humanity's sense of fragmentation increasing in the postmodern era. The ordering power of fictive devices inherent to life writing can help readers and biographers to turn the discontinuity of life into a sort of continuity (through fact arrangement, for example), no matter how artificial, and to make sense of their lives through the coherence of others'. As Warner presents the reader with fragments and bits of diaries and biographies incorporated within the narrative, her metabiographical fragmentation

may well be considered as a new tool reflecting reality more efficiently. It is a new form of realism which does not impose beginnings, middles and ends on reality in the Aristotelian fashion but rather presents events *in-medias-res*, interrupting them or shifting between different time perspectives as if following the sinuous workings of the mind or the processes of human memory.

Thematically speaking, the two genres exchange their themes: fiction tackles biographical research while the types of life writings included are fictionalized, or at least in part. Visually, the latter infiltrate novels through discreet or more explicit forms of textual transition or alternation between the main narrative and memoirs and diaries, resulting in the formation of numerous textual layers which I categorize as first and second-level texts or “subtexts.” These biographical subtexts will be designated as “fictional metabiography,” that is the thread connecting biography to fiction. Such levels reflect different types of narration, each one playing a crucial role in the structural conventions of fictional metabiography. Merle Tönnies, for instance, describes this alternation as “stratification of narrative levels” or “embedded narrative levels [which] infiltrate [the] text” and “overlaps between the different ontological levels ... always likely to collapse into each other” (74–75, 58).

First-level text is the “implied author” and uses third-person narration which describes events and characters and advances the plot. This level may also describe the sequence of the biographer’s ideas and methodology, his reasoning about the subject or biography in general, and some procedures such as text-editing. More diverse, second-level text usually relies on first-person point of view and is made up of myriad types of life writing such as letters, memoirs, and diaries. This level of narration reflects two closely-related aspects of metabiography: the focus on the biographer rather than the subject and the direct relationship between narrator and reader. The transition from one level to the other is carried out mainly through free indirect speech which is an important constituent of metabiography. This narrative mode is often associated with first-person narration and is defined as “self-narrated monologue” (Herman 29) by the *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*. Because of the continuity between the narrator’s and character’s utterances or thoughts, free indirect speech ensures the fluidity of discourse and uninterrupted fluctuations between a variety of “consciousnesses.” It is also an effective technique to melodramatically express characters’ emotions, fantasies and internal struggles, and a sense of immediacy achieved through the structural preservation of such features of direct speech as exclamations and interjections (Herman 26).

Structurally speaking, a greater number and variety of levels of texts co-exist in Warner's fictional metabiography. The "first-level text" or narration uses God-like, omniscient third-person point of view in most novels. In *In a Dark Wood*³ (1977), Gabriel, a modern English Jesuit priest, is in the process of editing the diaries and writing the biography of another: Andrew Da Rocha and his seventeenth-century mission in China. The parallel between the two priests in their intellectualized vision of religion and their repressed homosexuality provides an interesting insight into the nature of biographical research and its inevitable subjectivity.

There are relevant examples in *In a Dark Wood* which focuses on Gabriel's biographical research as well as on the workings of his inner self in parallel with the narration of his life "[w]hen Gabriel walked into the room ... Jerome stood up and ... indicated the table ... He was half a head taller than his brother, and his thick hair had kept its dark colour ... while Jerome's greying curls were swept back" (*Dark Wood* 5–6). With the addition of the descriptive mode, this type of narration provides even more information about the biographers and their entourage than first-person narration such as striking physical traits or hidden thoughts "the smile stayed with him and caused the priest a spasm, not of pain, but of pleasure in pain, for the smile passed straight through his hard hide of lonely self-absorption ... he was using Nanny's formal name ... to conceal ... his curiosity" (*Dark Wood* 14). In this instance, Gabriel's "spasm" of homosexual attraction towards Oliver, a seraphic harpsichord tuner, is a shameful, sinful state any priest would inevitably repress. Behind his apparent coldness, Gabriel has difficulties in controlling his impulses. The reader can thus have access to information the biographer would probably never divulge or acknowledge – even to him/herself – in case of first-person narration. Through a god-like omniscience, the narrator presents the reader with a more or less complete image of the biographer's ambiguities and complexities, bestowing more power upon him/her (the reader) by allowing him/her to constitute his/her own judgment. S/he can nevertheless influence him/her through a biased description, which keeps most controlling narratorial power in the narrator's rather than the biographer's hands.

In other instances such as *The Lost Father*, the author resorts to the alternation of third and second-person narration. Anna, an English museum curator, is trying to reconstruct her Italian grandfather Davide's memoir through his diaries and her own mother's memories. By historicizing Davide's life and fictionally reconstructing the duel he supposedly fought to save his sister's honor, Anna perpetuates his myth as a powerful father figure. She also attempts to respond to her own desire to recover a lost family history and a sense of belonging. The novel transports the

reader through many levels of narration and a multitude of narrators into different periods dating back to the beginnings of the twentieth century in southern Italy “Fantina came to a standstill ... She searched the road ahead for the approaching shadow of her father ... [spacing] You were disappointed not to see him, but not yet unhappy that he had not returned. Your father never let you down” (*The Lost Father* 158). The alternation of objective and subjective points of view in the previous quotation allows the narrator to vary the focus on the characters thus enriching the perspective of the text. Fantina’s outward attitude as a child towards the belated return of her father is described by the narrator. Then, the same Fantina, as an adult this time, is addressed directly by her daughter Anna who is more knowledgeable about her mother’s true feelings because she has the possibility to verify their accuracy straight from “her mother’s mouth,” an opportunity which is conventionally impossible for most biographers.

There is a similarity with Gabriel when he addresses his biographee, taking him as a witness to his own story, although he can never verify its accuracy “[w]as it on a night like this in 1685, Andrew, when you sat on the plains of Tartary beside the Emperor ... ? It was April then too, or was it May?” (*Dark Wood* 39) In both *The Lost Father* and *Dark Wood*, the protagonists are thus self-consciously engaged in biographical processes and research about subjects who are genetically, professionally or spiritually related to them. This fact again underlines the necessity and importance of empathy and “appreciation” (Nettels 110) of the biographer towards his/her subject thus deconstructing the detached biographer’s myth. In that regard, Allen Hibbard adds:

The enterprise of writing biography necessarily involves two distinct, yet related, narrative strands: the story of the subject and the story of the biographer coming to know, structure and recreate the life of the subject. Through the process, the relationship between biographer and subject becomes particularly tight, producing intense identification. (19)

So the biographer’s quest for truth about his/her subject makes him/her delve into the deepest recesses of the biographee’s soul, thus creating affinities or revealing similarities which bring the two closer, especially thanks to empathy.

These examples of metabiographical *mise en abîme* also expose and uncover the formats of these different kinds of life writing. The latter are either textually separated from narration by the clear-cut divisions and indentation of their pattern as with some of the letters and diaries or in some cases divided by chapters, the beginning of each extract of memoir for example indicating the exact location and year of the events

“[f]rom *The Duel/Rupe*, 1911” (*The Lost Father* 58). In other cases, these life writing types can be structurally and thematically interwoven with the first-level text as is the case with biography in *Dark Wood*. Da Rocha's diaries, which Gabriel is translating and editing into a manuscript of his own composition, are usually brought about by such introductory verbs as “remembered” or “thought.” The diaries are placed within double quotation marks while Gabriel's manuscript uses single ones.

Sometimes, particular memories, objects, feelings or sensations can literally conjure up the biographer's research and perform a textual transition to the second-level text “[i]n his brain there took place a sudden implosion of time and circumstance and an exquisite sensation, sweet and toothsome as honey, overwhelmed him ... Gabriel sensed Andrew da Rocha brushing past him in the night” (*Dark Wood* 39). On the heath near his house, at night, the priest is experiencing a sort of a biographer's epiphany through his physical senses, as if time and space have vanished and allowed him to get in touch with his biographee:

He smiled to himself. And he laid a burning coal on my lips ... so I should write the truth Not quite, for I'm not writing revelation, but close. This experience is the essence of good writing, this closeness Was it on a night like this in 1685, Andrew, when you sat on the plains of Tartary beside the Emperor K'ang-hsi after a day's hunting? ... Gabriel remembered the diary: the emperor had summoned Andrew to his side. (*Dark Wood* 39)

This stream-of-consciousness relies on free indirect speech which allows a textual smoothness in the transition between Gabriel's thoughts and da Rocha's story. It is an effective technique to melodramatically express the biographer's emotions, especially towards the subject, without disturbing the continuity of the different levels of texts. However, the relationships between the two levels depend on the type of life writing in question. The letters and diaries for example not only participate in advancing the plot of the novels, they also help enlighten the reader on certain aspects of the events or attitudes of particular characters, not always made obvious by narration.

As a consequence, the reader is given more importance and proactivity through his/her reconstruction of these textual traces of the past. Indeed, the reader's interpretative power is trusted while more freedom is allowed to his/her understanding. S/he him/herself turns into a sort of biographer, editing and collating the information s/he's provided with.

A second consequence of Warner's *mise en abîme* of diaries and letters is the growing intimacy between the reader and the biographee. Such closeness modifies the metabiographical equation as the reader no longer needs the mediation of the biographer to access the personality of the subject.

Biography and memoir also constitute other types of life writing incorporated within Warner's novels, through which she goes even further in her metabiographical exposing of biographical procedures, especially in *Dark Wood*. In addition to mentioning in detail the different tasks and steps related to the editing of Da Rocha's diary such as "collating and arranging the immense range of material" (8) or reasoning and speculating about his subject's attitude "Gabriel knew, and so he suspected did Andrew himself" (*Dark Wood* 122), the actual drafts, revisions and corrections are literally exposed through the *mise en abîme* technique. This familiarizes the reader with the minute organization of biographical composition on the one hand, and with the context of the diary on the other hand:

Gabriel was ... continuing to make notes ... setting down the ideas in neatly indented lists ... He had now reached Topic C ...
 '1. Arrival of new Fathers strengthens China mission ...
 2. But. They are French ...
 3. Andrew feels bound to his king.' (*Dark Wood* 159–60)

The reader can thus access the biographer's brainstorming and methods of clustering his ideas and, at the same time, independently make sense of the unprocessed themes before they are actually interpreted and included within Gabriel's final manuscript. A similar kind of metabiographical comment is made by A. S. Byatt in *The Biographer's Tale* when the biographer exposes a detailed, practical description of what he thinks are the necessary preliminaries to his research: "I decided to read them all through, and to note – on paper – all the subjects of the 'entries.' Then I would look at the groupings (if any) and copy out what I myself found most striking" (144). This important structural addition restores the importance of "raw [biographical] material" and replaces the biographer's inevitable linguistic and interpretative refinement of what would otherwise be a chaotic and untitled bundle. This third-level text achieves immediacy and adds a dramatic dimension by allowing the reader direct access to the anticipatory reasoning of the biographer.

In *The Lost Father*, Warner's metabiography exposes through first-person point of view the hardships of composing someone else's memoir. In terms of re-presenting the past, Anna has difficulties grasping the mentality of her grandfather, a 1920s southern Italian patriarch, herself a modern Englishwoman with the shadow of an accent in her mother's tongue as her only link to her origins. Anna's temporal and geographic distance from her biographee makes it impossible to recover her family history without the interference of her own creativity and perspective.

The complex relationship between fact and fiction is also tackled, especially in relation to the impetus for Anna's memoir: a duel supposedly fought by her grandfather and which turns out to be a legend, a myth. The question that keeps tormenting the biographer is whether she should keep the mythical version or rectify it with an uncertain truth, knowing that the memoir is in all cases partly imagined "where did the duel idea come from in the first place? I thought it was *true*. I took it as something that had happened. God, I've been trying to write a memoir, based on *fact*, not a teen romance" (*The Lost Father* 274). In addition to being openly declared as such (that is imagined), the incorporated memoir is alternatively commented upon by both biographer (Anna) and biographee (the mother Fantina) in terms of writing techniques such as diction, and interrupted by other types of life writing and viewpoints such as the father's diaries, a mosaic of text-levels:

'I'll put that in,' I said, opening my current scarlet and black Flying Eagle notebook, the sixth since I started putting together an imaginary memoir of my southern Italian mother ... I went on reading to you. I'd filled two notebooks with a draft of the early part, The Duel, and I was trying to weave that story together with other memories of your childhood, of the Mussolini years and your father's last day. (*The Lost Father* 4)

The acts of opening her notebook, of "putting in" her mother's memories and reading extracts to her are metabiographical in themselves. Anna then reveals the name of the story and its historical and personal background. She also discloses her methodical assembling of themes and important stages, in addition to the crucial help of her mother as a first-hand source with the accuracy of fact-gathering. The different levels of text and rich multiple character narration thus interact and strive to provide as comprehensive a portrait of the father as possible.

Thematically speaking, the second-level text or metabiography allows for the deconstruction of a multitude of cultural and socio-political myths through the uncovering of life writing procedures and techniques. The process of writing about, incorporating and commenting upon past lives in Warner's novels is thus self-referential as it lays bare the different phases and difficulties of the genre by fictionalizing them as well as exposing life writing myths such as its so-called objectivity and the biographer's supposed detachment from his/her biographee. For example, a close relationship or even kinship between biographer and subject may impair his/her objectivity while editing the latter's diaries. In *Dark Wood*, Gabriel constantly identifies with his subject "Gabriel was deeply moved by his subject's pleas, and it became impossible for him to avoid applying them to himself" (16). The biographer shares the same repressed

feelings with his biographee, especially his loss of faith and suspected homosexuality.

Equally deconstructed is the myth of the southern Italian local community and Diaspora as ignorant and backward, destroyed through the diaries of Davide in *The Lost Father*. Besides the fact that the father himself is a lawyer and an educated man, his recounting of his family's life under the dictatorship of Mussolini and the hardships of their trip to America in the 1920s participates in changing the prejudiced ideas shared by Americans about these people. However, Davide sounds arrogant in his desire to demarcate himself from his own people thanks to his superior physical attributes and his profession. He seems to have internalized the very racist notions he is criticizing, namely "insignificance" and lack of education:

[The Americans] distinguish us from the northerners because we are short and hairy and analphabetic. No matter – they will soon see that I at least am none of these ... we seem an inconsiderable people, easily disregarded ... Yet I feel myself so far from this insignificance that it makes my head ache to consider their ignorance. (*The Lost Father* 146)

CONCLUSION

The belief in a purely factual account of a person's life may be a myth but it is clear that the biographer's story proves valuable in many ways in terms of enlightening readers about the true nature of the biographical enterprise. Marina Warner's fictional metabiography indeed provides a new kind of realism in its exposure through fiction of biographical research and its internal mechanisms. Combining the genres of fiction and life writing, her novels display a variety of textual levels moving fluidly from one perspective to the other through free indirect speech, second-person and multiple character narration. Moreover, the concern with time and memory in Warner's fiction, as well as her characters' constant attempts at coming to terms with their past has paved the way for a multitude of thematic and structural alternations between past and present and between narrators of all kinds. The *mise-en-abîme* as a technique thus emphasizes the hybridity of both Warner's fiction and of life writing types in general. Such a structural, thematic and temporal layering is an experimental "reworking of realism" (Head 221) because it has come to reflect the very fragmentation of reality itself and allow for different perspectives, however imagined. The usually silenced can speak, be they homosexual Jesuit priests or southern Italian immigrants. By relying on

the characterization of such marginalized people and spaces, a fictional and real space is provided for their voices and the deconstruction of the myths and ideologies surrounding them. Although most of Warner's biographers and biographees are fictional, her metabiography still uncovers and questions important life writing concerns, namely the limitations of biographical textuality as a truthful representation of the subject's self and of the outside world and the biographer's so-called objectivity and detachment. Not least important is the increasing self-consciousness or attention of biography to its form and literariness rather than its content. In that light, biographical conventions like factuality, referentiality and chronological progress are seen to be founded on false assumptions and myths. Warner's fictional metabiography also betrays such unacknowledged characteristics as the biographer's empathy with his/her subject and the former's constant presence in, and interference with the narrative. Warner's is a varied and transparent text which not only uncovers the reasoning and methodological tasks preceding the composition of life writings but also their outcome as a finished "text product." This fictional metabiography thus challenges the mythical omniscience and authority of the biographer, revealing his/her presence within the narrative and bringing the biographee's own words into view. As a consequence, the relations of authority between biographers and subjects are reconfigured, while the reader's own interpretative access to the hidden aspects of the genre increases the creative potential of life writing.

More generally, Warner's metabiography is a parallel phenomenon to non-fictional types of metabiography, mainly contributing to the deconstruction of various myths while fictionalizing postmodern life writing concerns about the ultimate knowability of the past. Metabiography in that sense is deeply linked to the postmodern concern with the past and the renaissance of historical fiction among contemporary female novelists like Warner whose aim is to clearly establish a more general link between life writing and history. With the return to referentiality and non-fiction in the few last decades, this kind of experimentation has successfully shown the concreteness and political productivity of fictionalization. Warner's fictional metabiography may be the literary harbinger of the *fin de siècle* "biographical turn," the (fictional) chronicle of a 'birth' foretold.

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NOTES

- 1 Edel's *Writing Lives* is an early and interesting example of "personal criticism."
- 2 Gudmundsdóttir and Hamilton's works reflect a strong distrust in postmodernism and post-structuralism in relation to biography and autobiography.
- 3 The title of this novel will be abbreviated to *Dark Wood* from now on.