



Birgitte Possing. *Understanding Biographies: On Biographies in History and Stories in Biography* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2017, ISBN 9788776749927).

Caitríona Ní Dhúill. *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, ISBN 9783030346621).

Henrik Rosengren

Lund University

Both in the Scandinavian countries and in Germany, the status of biographical writing has changed to a far greater extent in the last fifty years than in the Anglo-Saxon world. In the latter context, biography has been more popular than in Germany and, for example, Denmark and Sweden. It has continuously been regarded as both a genre worthy from a scholarly career point of view and as a means for scholars, such as historians, to reach a wider audience outside the academic ivory tower. Explanations for this difference may lie in diverse scholarly traditions where American and British scholars have consciously strived for a larger readership than the purely specialized and interdisciplinary one. An Anglo-Saxon narrative tradition in which language, style and composition have been key words has supported biography writing.

Criticism of the biography as a method to gain knowledge of history and society was probably strongest in the 1970s. Representatives of the social-historical paradigm clearly influenced by Marxist structuralism questioned the individual's significance in historical processes and criticized the biographical genre's lack of theory. The biography was put in quarantine. Representatives of the Frankfurt School characterized the biography as a form of escapism and an expression of a bourgeois ideology. When the historian John C. G. Röhl wrote a biography of Kaiser Wilhelm, he was attacked by influential social historians in Bielefeld. It is the Bielefeld School and the crisis of structuralism rather than the 'biographical' turn that should be emphasized, said Röhl, speaking of the 1990s increased German interest in personal history (Berghahn 234–5).

The influential Annales school's focus on mass phenomena, social groups and long periods of time did not fit in with studies of individual lives either. This, and other notions about the death of the author, declared the biography in France dead. Since the 1990s, however, there has been talk of a biographical renaissance both in the Nordic countries and on the European continent. In response to the notion of the biography's lack of theory, its focus on 'great men' and linearly cohesive narrative structure, its proponents have tried new approaches to access and highlight the individual's role in history. The reason why the 'biographical turn' occurred during the 1990s can, according to Röhl, be related to interdisciplinary fluctuations such as the weakening of structuralism and the emergence of gender studies and stronger voices for the actor's re-entry on the historical stage. Also, major political and global upheavals, such as the fall of the Soviet Union and the Internet revolution, were two important structural changes that paved the way for an increased belief in the individual's potential for influence and thereby for a resurrected interest in man and history.

Since the biographical turn of the 1990s, a great deal of literature has been published in English, German and the Nordic languages that problematize biographical writing. Two titles that both relate to the biographical turn and at the same time can be said to be an expression of the same are *Understanding Biographies* and *Metabiography*, two very different books written from different academic disciplines and angles: one theoretical, the other historiographical and focused on the craft.

The Danish historian Birgitte Possing is the author of *Understanding Biographies*. Possing is an experienced biographer with a handful of full-length biographies as well as theoretical and methodological texts on biography writing on her track record. *Understanding Biography* is based on a Danish edition (*Ind i biografien*) from 2015. It has a broad target group, including academics, with the ambition to write biographies, critics and also other biographers. Possing's book contains four quite different parts that in turn deal with what a biography is or can be, different categories of biographies, the history of biography writing, the relationship between the author, biographer and reader and ethical issues. In the subchapter 'Biographical Gender', she reports statistics from an analysis of 975 biography reviews from German, American, French, British and Nordic historical journals in the years 2000 to 2011. The purpose of that study was, among other things, to examine which categories of protagonists are biographed, their gender and the gender of the biographers and how this appears in different countries. Among other things, she concludes that there has been a certain increase in female protagonists (5 percent) and female biographers (10 percent) during the period studied and that

biographers are guided by an identification with the protagonists in their choices of who to write about. In the final chapter, Possing writes about four different biographies, how they were read and received and which biographical category they belong to in order to show the diversity of the biographical genre.

Caitríona Ní Dhúill is a German professor at the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University College Cork, Ireland. *Metabiography* is a book project that has stretched over at least a decade during which several parts were published in other contexts. The project has thus become part of Ní Dhúill's own biography. Ní Dhúill's dense and somewhat impressionistic book consists of eight chapters. It is mainly linked by the concept of 'metabiography' and Ní Dhúill's pleads for using this concept to write but also to read and analyze biographies. The emphasis is on the latter and by analyzing biographies from the end of the eighteenth century until today, Ní Dhúill shows how the concept can help us understand how biographies have been written and why they have been written as they have.

In 'Chapter One', she discusses the basic concept of metabiography and links it to the purpose of the book. The discussion regarding metabiography continues in chapter two where Ní Dhúill contrasts it with the two more established concepts of metahistory and metafiction. The notion of 'the great man' and the influence of heroic discourse on the biographical tradition is dealt with in the third chapter. The fourth chapter introduces the concept of *sousveillance*, an approach based on critically looking at a canonized biographed person from below and questioning and analytically challenging the person's elevated position. The fifth chapter deals with the contradiction between the narrative and the lived life, but also the significance and challenge of everyday trivialities for the biographical project. The frequently used metaphor 'portrait' is dealt with in chapter six and so is the relationship between image and biography. 'Chapter Seven' is a review of anti-biographies and chapter eight is an analysis of biographies of women written by women and with discussions about how biographical writing is a part of gender construction. Here she also discusses what the biography genre can contribute in terms of gender studies, this with inspiration from Judith Butler's thesis of the citationality of gender.

The basic premise of both Ní Dhúill and Possing is, firstly, the tension between the critique of the biography and the inherent impossibility of capturing another person's life in text, summed up in Virginia Woolf's well-known sentence: 'How can one make a life out of Six Cardboard boxes full of tailor's bills, love letters and old picture postcards?' Taking on a biographical project, especially in a scholarly context, also means

that a researcher often has to defend the choice of genre more than in other contexts. For Possing, Danish professor of history Niels Thomsen's criticism of her 1992 dissertation and the subsequent debate created a red thread in her academic career as a biographer. The incident frames her presentation and finally she praises the now deceased professor for forcing her to reflect on and argue for the meaning of biographical writing as an academic genre. Thomsen's question 'Where's the muscle?' has followed Possing's career and to sum up, her answer is that it is about highlighting the individual's importance for historical change. History is not just events and facts but human pain and happiness, success and adversity, struggle, aspirations, encounters, memories, expectations, relationships, goals and so on.

The resistance to biography is illustrated in Ní Dhúill's text in particular by a chapter in which she analyzes three 'anti-biographies' (two written texts and one Ingmar Bergman film) with the aim of showing alternative approaches to portraying life. Both Possing and Ní Dhúill use the resistance to biography as a source to strengthen the argument for the genre. The opponents ask legitimate questions that biographers must deal with. Secondly, Possing and Ní Dhúill relate to the male dominance of the genre, both in terms of who has been biographed and who has written biographies, and in Ní Dhúill's case also *how* biographies have been written. Ní Dhúill uses the expression 'The Master's Face' to reflect on the biographical tradition's connection to hierarchical male structures, power and cultural elites. The heroic story, shaped in a patriarchal discourse during the Romantic period and exemplified by the author Thomas Carlyle, is to some extent still vibrant among popular historical biographies, but is challenged by the serious modern biographers who strive to problematize, question presupposed truths and relativize canonized views of the protagonist.

As a concept, certainly in comparison with, for example, metahistory (mainly associated with Hayden White's 1973 essay) 'metabiography' is not very established. It is a reflexive and critical approach to biography which, according to Ní Dhúill, can contribute to the development of biographical practice, but also serves as a starting point for a critical way of reading biographies. What is then included in the concept of metabiography? Ní Dhúill writes:

Metabiography's interest is in how the biographical discourse on a single figure shifts and accumulates over time to form a complex palimpsest of portraits which can reveal much about the changing positions of biographer and reader, about changing conceptions of subjectivity, and about the changing understandings of how individual lives relates to larger structures and processes. (6)

This emphasizes the importance of the impact of temporal and cultural differences on how a life can be understood and portrayed. How are biographies written and why are they written the way they are? From a metabiographical perspective, a biography is not a reconstruction of a life but a 'hermeneutic mode' or an interpretation of the traces of a life (26). A biography is strongly time- and context-bound.

Biographers with a metabiographical approach will include a discussion about their own contexts and motives for writing a biography of a certain person; they should so problematize their interpretations. Self-reflection is thus an expression of metabiography and rests on the assumption that biographical writing is also autobiographical writing. In the case of *Posing* in particular, but partly also in *Ní Dhúills*, I would have liked to have seen a clearer distinction between the demands that, for example, the historical tradition places on a biography and those imposed by publishers from a commercial perspective. In a scholarly context, where the presentation is based on research questions, these can be explanations of limitations and selections. *Posing* and *Ní Dhúill* share the view that the definitive biography can never be written: a reasonable view from a scholarly perspective, but a view that often runs counter to how commercial biographies are presented.

It would have been desirable to have been given a more extensive discussion about concrete experiences from a biographer's point of view, especially in *Posing's* book. Her solid experience as a biographer must mean that she has gained practical knowledge that she could share regarding, for example, the question how to find a connection between the individual and his or her context, how to select and prioritize source material, how to deal with ethical dilemmas et cetera. I would also have liked *Ní Dhúill* to have devoted more space to showing how the metabiographical perspective can more specifically develop biographical writing. She argues that this is the case, but gives few concrete examples of how it can be done in practice.

In sum, these are two very interesting books that fully describe the biography genre's change over time and relate to historical examples of biographies, mainly from the Enlightenment to the present day. Neither of the authors refers to the other, but they both probably would have benefitted from reading each other's works. While *Posing* mainly discusses what a biography is and can be and makes herself an advocator for the genre's scholarly potential, *Ní Dhúill* discusses the genre more from an outsider's perspective, but nonetheless very fruitfully. *Posing's* book and others that problematize the actual writing of biographies could, like biographies, be the subject of metabiographical analyses. I would especially recommend to read both *Posing* and *Ní Dhúill* as the two books,

based on their differences, fertilize each other and together create a deeper and wider insight into the challenges of biographical writing.

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