

# Biography and Fictionality in the Greek Literary Tradition

## Introduction

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In modern literature worldwide, fictional biography over time has obtained a canonized status. To illustrate the genre's success in postmodern times, a brief discussion of *Summertime* (2009), the latest novel of Nobel prize winner J.M. Coetzee, should be sufficient. This novel is the third volume in a series of 'autobiographical' texts – featuring also *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002) – and purports to 'reconstruct' the author's years as a junior faculty member at the University of Cape Town in the 1970s. In order to do so, the implied author – who in an ironic twist declares Coetzee dead – stages an English biographer who carries out a number of interviews with people in whose lives the author has taken part during a limited period of time: a neighbor with whom he had an affair, a Brazilian dancer whose daughter he taught English, his favorite niece and two former colleagues at the university. In this way, Coetzee doubly detaches himself from his own autobiography in order to critically comment upon his own life from a distant perspective. Apart from a healthy measure of self-irony – what is so interesting about the rather banal life of J.M. Coetzee anyway? – the textual strategies in *Summertime* also aim at underscoring both the fictitious character of (auto)biographies in general and the difficulties to be faced by the author's own biographers in the future.

To arrive at the desk of a world-famous author such as Coetzee, the genre of fictional biography and its concomitant textual strategies and thematic opportunities have known a long and complicated history. As a comprehensive account of such a historical evolution would by far surpass the scope of a single journal issue, the current special issue of *Phrasis* is a collection of case studies which have one specific methodological focus in common (see below). Moreover, the volume as a whole is subject to two limitations. Firstly,

it is limited to the *Greek* literary tradition. Within this scope, the volume is organized diachronically and includes representatives of the biographical genre from Antiquity and the Byzantine and modern eras. This arrangement has been chosen for a number of reasons. In order to better understand the history of the biographical (as any) genre in western literature, it is useful to reassess its roots – or should we say ‘generic pattern’, to speak with Moennig? – in Antiquity, an era with a rich tradition of the descriptions of *Lives* (so-called *vitae* or *bioi*). As recent studies (Agapitos 2004; Moennig 1999; Théologitis 2004) point out, parts of the narrative structure of these lives, as a loosely defined type of story, also find expression in Christian narrative literature (such as Gospels, apocryphical Acts and saints’ lives), Byzantine narrative traditions (*Digenis Akritis*, romances, *The Tale of Belisarios*), and perhaps even in biographical poetry of the Cretan Renaissance (Stefanos Sachlikis). Moreover, Greek fictional biography revived in the modern era, predominantly in 20<sup>th</sup> century modern and postmodern adaptations of European literary models.

The second limitation imposed on the material in this volume is bound up with our diachronic approach in that it results from one of the major differences between ancient and modern ‘non-fictional’ writing in general and biography in particular. As is well known, ancient ‘non-fictional’ genres are characterized by a blurred borderline between historicity and fictionality (and acknowledged as such by ancient writers). Ancient biography in particular contains fictional and/or novelistic elements to varying degrees since its earliest representative (one commonly refers to Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC). Modern biography, on the other hand, adopts much clearer standards regarding factuality and historical accuracy as opposed to fiction, but, as Hodgkinson rightly observes, even here the potential overlap with fiction is greater than in other ‘non-fictional’ genres: to tell a life is closely related to exploring and speculating on private moments, personal desires, psychological motives and inner thoughts, all of which are not straightforwardly accessible to any observer (see also Cohn 1999). This almost by definition makes problematic any biographer’s self-portrayal as an author of non-fiction (and of non-fiction only). This observation inevitably interacts with (and profoundly complicates) another concept that is more difficult to grapple in ancient biographies than in modern ones: authorial intention. What did/do biographers exactly seek to communicate? Is it the historical and factual truth about a person’s life? Or an encomiastic account of one’s life? Or a

more broadly ideological message exemplified by one's life? And, perhaps more importantly, to what extent and how do textual strategies in biographies allow us to identify such intentions?

The articles in this volume explore in different ways how biographies shape their own self-positioning in relation to these questions. Moreover, they do so from a *formal* point of view. To date, research into fictionality/factuality in these texts has focused almost exclusively on the level of the narrated: it primarily deals with their value as sources of historical factuality and the history of ideas. Likewise, scholarship on the texts' generic delineation (Momigliano 1993), *topoi* and rhetorics focused on content and formulation (style) rather than on the formal construction of the narration (in spite of attention paid to formal aspects of narration in Greek literature by de Jong et al. 2004 and 2007 and, occasionally, ancient historiography, for example, Wiseman 1993). This volume, on the other hand, focuses on the interplay between fictionality and the formal construction of narration in biographical narratives. Do biographies present themselves as conveying history – many factual and historical inaccuracies notwithstanding – or do they rather position themselves as pursuing other aims? How self-aware are they about their own historicity or fictionality? Which techniques do they adopt to flesh out such self-awareness? And do ancient and modern biographies differ from each other in this respect?

Owen Hodkinson connects ancient and modern by examining in a number of ancient biographical texts what Cohn (1999) and Hamburger (1973) identify as a defining formal feature of fiction in modern biography: psychic omniscient narration (especially through a mode of representation that has been coined 'internal focalization'). His survey of how various biographies (whose fictional status is in question) adopt this device (or consciously avoid it or neutralize it through the use of disclaimers or the foregrounding of sources) leads him to conclude that ancient authors, like modern ones, recognize the device of psychic omniscience as a deliberately fictionalizing technique. Paying attention to this device in ancient texts allows Hodkinson to distribute them along a fiction-history spectrum ranging from purely and consciously fictional narratives (such as Greek novels), over obviously (and presumably consciously) fictionalizing biographies (Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, the *Aesop Romance* and the *Alexander Romance*) to pseudo-historical fictional *bioi* (Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*) and historical *bioi* (Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*).

Two articles in this volume deal with ancient biographies that may be situated towards the history end of such a spectrum. Both Graeme Miles and Ilaria Ramelli explain that Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* and the biography of Addai respectively set out to give an accurate representation. And yet, in both cases this representation is shown to be blurred by instances of fictionalization. Miles explores ways in which the narrative form of the *Life of Plotinus* interacts with the philosophical message of this text. Although this text is shown to be concerned with its self-positioning as non-fiction (for example through the expression of uncertainty, i.e. the explicit avoidance of omniscience), any straightforwardly factual representation in this *Life* is blurred by the construction of the narrator as well as the notoriously unusual temporal disposition within this *Life*, both of which are shown to underscore a deep philosophical message about (Platonic) *mimesis* and the limits of language.

Ilaria Ramelli, for her part, draws attention (like Hodgkinson in his discussion of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*) to the importance of foregrounding source material as a technique of narratorial self-presentation, but simultaneously adds a diachronic dimension by tracing an evolution from a concern with factuality in Eusebius' sources (especially Bardaisan, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century) and Eusebius' account (4<sup>th</sup> century) on the one hand (despite their conspicuously encomiastic focus), to novelistic, more straightforwardly fictional practice in the Syriac *Doctrina Addai* (5<sup>th</sup> century).

One of the representational techniques that are touched upon in both Miles' and Ramelli's article is the staging of a paradigm or *exemplum* for reasons of contrast or similarity. This technique and its possibly fictionalizing implications are explored at greater length by Ranja Knöbl in her discussion of Satyrus of Callatis' *Life of Euripides*, a fragmentarily preserved dialogue on the great tragic playwright and, as Knöbl underlines, on his literary art more specifically. The dialogic form of this narrative, its (consequent) asymmetrical characterization of the interlocutors and the presence of the Socratic paradigm (and, indeed, of the literary paradigm of the Socratic dialogues) are taken as instances that invite a 'paramimetic' reading of this biography – a reading, that is, seeing this text as standing *besides* (and commenting upon) the biographical tradition on Euripides rather than being part of it.

The contributions to the study of fictional biography in Byzantine and modern Greek literature, subsequently, are important in view of a number of ongoing debates in the field of Modern Greek Studies. Ulrich Moennig's extensive article studies biographical arrangement as a 'generic pattern' –

rather than biography as a fixed ‘literary genre’ – throughout the middle- and late-Byzantine period. (Just as Miles’ discussion of the role of narratorial self-portrayal, then, Moennig’s article points to an alternative approach to conceptualising the biographical genre.) By underscoring the coherence of a large and variegated corpus of texts that until recently was not thought of as being closely interrelated, his paper fits into a wider series of studies that attempt to demonstrate the linguistic (the use of the vernacular), metric (the use of *politikos stichos* or ‘political verse’) and generic coherence (the use of e.g. romance and biography) of the system of ‘early Modern Greek’ literature (12<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century) (see e.g. Jeffreys 2007 and Kaplanis 2009). In retrospect, the omnipresence in Byzantine literature of a generic pattern that stems from Antiquity could serve – at least in those cases of unconscious transmission through the Gospels and the saints’ lives as intermediate stages – as a narrative indication for the diachronic continuity of the Greek tradition. In other instances, the use of a biographical arrangement – often in combination with heroes taken from ancient Greek mythology or history – seems to have been a more or less deliberate choice, which was – at least to a certain extent – in line with the ideology of ‘Hellenism’ as it gained prominence from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards (see e.g. Magdalino 1991; Magdalino & Macrides 1993; Beaton 2007; Borghart & De Temmerman 2010). In retrospect, one strand of contemporary scholarship holds these arguments as evidence to situate the beginnings of Modern Greek literature in the Komnenian era (whereas another group of scholars still argues for the ‘Cretan Renaissance’ as point of departure for the Modern Greek tradition) (Panayotakis 1993; Danezis 2006; Vagenas 2007; Kaplanis 2009).

This special issue closes with a broad survey of the reception of the – by then Western European – tradition of fictional(ised) biography in 20<sup>th</sup> century Greek literature. Following a number of concise but valuable remarks of a theoretical nature, Georgia Farinou-Malamatari examines a series of Greek modernist and postmodern novels. Throughout her discussion, she amply demonstrates the capability of Modern Greek fiction – as a peripheral national literary tradition – to adopt international currents and trends in creative ways, either in order to express local concerns or to highlight international issues from a ‘Greek’ point of view. Because of Farinou-Malamatari’s synthetic approach in combination with several brief discussions of internationally celebrated authors such as Nikos Kazantzakis, Vassilis Vassilikos and

Rhea Galanaki, this article will be of interest to students of contemporary European literature too.

The procedure of scholarly publication is severe, especially when peer review comes into play, and modern academics tend to have less time as they face a growing number of educational and administrative tasks. These are two of the main reasons why the study of fictional biography in Byzantine and modern Greek literature is represented by only one single contribution in every instance. The huge number of reactions to our initial call for papers notwithstanding, only two of the submitted and/or promised articles on biographical features in the literary production of these eras eventually made their way through the entire review process. The same also applies to a certain extent to the section on ancient Greek literature, although its consequences are less conspicuous. However promising most manuscripts were, as editors we have trusted in good conscience upon the expertise of our referees. Therefore, we hope that the special issue on biography and fictionality in the Greek literary tradition as it stands may encourage further research in the field, and perhaps be of inspiration for those who – for whatever reason – did not make it this time.

Finally, due to unforeseen circumstances, this year's literary issue of *Phrasis* contains no 'Avant-Garde Studies' section. This is, however, the exception that proves the rule, as *Phrasis* will continue to promote this area of expertise from the next issue onwards.

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