An examination of biography in Possession by A.S. Byatt and Dickens by Peter Ackroyd

Sylvia McLeod

Edith Cowan University

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An Examination of Biography in Possession by A.S. Byatt and Dickens by Peter Ackroyd

By

Sylvia McLeod

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of

Master of Arts, English (Year Two)

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B. Ed., M. A. (Eng) (Year One)
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Abstract

This thesis is an examination of Possession by A.S. Byatt and Dickens by Peter Ackroyd, and aims to contribute to the Poetics of biography. Although there has been a paucity of literature about biography until the latter part of the twentieth century, a growing number of writings, by biographers and scholars, reflects the interest in developing a body of theory of the biography genre. My thesis is a part of this initiative.

The two works which I have chosen for this project are critiques of biography, albeit from different perspectives. Possession is a novel which narrativises issues of biography, while Dickens takes the form of a fictionalised biography. Since there is a metabiographical element in both works, they provide scope for a radical approach to an examination of biography. I am unaware of any criticism which addresses theoretical issues of biography using two different genres.

The issues under examination in this thesis begin with an attempt to define biography. By means of Possession and Dickens, I explore the nature and parameters of biography. I
then examine the issue of truth in biography, and the possibility of distilling the essential nature of a subject from diverse, and probably unreliable sources. Associated with this issue is the question of the authoritative stance of the biographer, both with regard to transmitting the truth about his or her subject, and concerning issues of representation of women in biography. Finally, I examine textual design in biography, and the problematics of fusing factual with aesthetic elements in what purports to be a non-fictional form.

My aim is to synthesise the theories expressed by Peter Ackroyd and A.S. Byatt, and a range of other biographers and critics, and thereby generate my own. By contributing to the Poetics of biography, I hope to enhance readers’ appreciation of this literary form.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.
Acknowledgements

My principal thanks are to my supervisor, Dr Jill Durey. She provided essential encouragement, and an education in scholarship.

I would also like to thank Victoria Glendinning, who willingly found time in her busy schedule to give me an interview.

My final thanks are to Chris McLeod for technical assistance, infinite patience and support.
A note on the thesis

References to A.S. Byatt's novel, Possession, refer to the Vintage edition (1991), Random House U.K. Ltd., first published in 1990 by Chatto & Windus Ltd., Great Britain. References to Peter Ackroyd's biography, Dickens, refer to the Minerva edition (1991), first published in 1990 by Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd., Great Britain. Where the texts are quoted within the body of the thesis, the titles are abbreviated to (P) and (D) respectively.
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Appendix
Introduction

This thesis is an examination of biography by means of two creative texts, both of which, I will argue, are critiques of biography, albeit from different positions. *Possession: A Romance*, by A.S. Byatt, is fiction which contains discussion of theoretical issues. *Dickens*, by Peter Ackroyd, is a biography which draws attention to theoretical issues by its *modus operandi*. The two works, then, can be viewed as metabiographies since they are concerned with the theory of biography, even though they do not belong to the same genre. I intend to examine current issues under debate in the growing Poetics of biography by means of these two metabiographies.

There was a paucity of theoretical writing on the subject of biography until the last two decades when theories began to proliferate. Many critical essays, interviews and lectures given at academic conferences have been collected and published, in volume form, in recent years. In my examination of biography, I will draw on these materials, written by biographers, academics, or those who qualify under both rubrics. The aspects of biography about which they write are wide-ranging, including
methodology, ethical issues, experiences of biographers, experiments and the application of current theories of literary criticism to biographies. The adoption of biography by the world of scholarship reflects the heightened status of biography; it is no longer the novel's poor relation, tainted by association with popular scandal-sheets distributed by the media. Biography, it would appear, is worthy of serious attention. My thesis is designed to support this initiative.

In addition to recent critical essays on biography, I draw on a number of key theorists of the twentieth century. This is a period of innovation and interest in theoretical issues of biography and, though experimentation is by no means limited to this era, the discussions of twentieth-century theorists on issues and directions of biography are most relevant to an examination of the contemporary works of Ackroyd and Byatt. Notable theorists of biography, on whose work I draw extensively, are Leon Edel and James Clifford. Edel's work assists in the identification of the issues of biography, particularly those related to definition. His work provides theories concerning the relationship of the factual content of biography with the use, by the biographer, of interpretative
comment and imagination. Edel also writes extensively about the biographer's use of psychology and psycho-analysis, questioning the efficacy of these methods as a tool to reach the subject's deep consciousness. Clifford's work is the starting point of my examination of the boundaries between biography and prose fiction, since he theorises about the balance of objectivity and the use of fictional devices in biography.

Ira Nadel is a more recent theorist whose work supports my examination of biography. His interest in new directions in biographical form, and its relationship with the fictional element of biography, has proved useful to my study of the works of Ackroyd and Byatt. Nadel's work addresses all the issues of the contemporary Poetics of biography and unequivocally encourages a more literarily informed approach to biography by readers and writers.

I will refer throughout this thesis to the different branches of Virginia Woolf's work. Her ground-breaking essays, as well as her experiments in biography and fiction, are still required reading in the area of biography. Woolf draws
attention, by her critical writing and her methodology, to the question of biography as an art form. She also theorises that less celebrated figures are appropriate subject-matter for biography. In particular, she advocates the inclusion of women as subjects and as writers of biography.

Another area of reading which informs my work concerns issues of gender. I find this area of scholarship important in an examination of works related to the nineteenth century. Writers such as Sidonie Smith, Valerie Sanders and Linda Wagner-Martin offer perspectives which illuminate areas of tension in the conjunction of Ackroyd's and Byatt's work, and encourage careful examination of the representation of women in works from our own, and other eras.

A number of biographies contribute to my examination of the changing directions of the genre. A vast pool of biographies are available, and from these I will concentrate on the works of Peter Ackroyd, Victoria Glendinning and Claire Tomalin to support this thesis, though my reading of many other biographies widens my understanding of the genre. Forster's biography of Dickens provides a contrast to that of Ackroyd. A
'life and times' biography of Wordsworth and Coleridge, written by A.S. Byatt, gives an insight into her preferred biographical methodology. A number of Byatt's essays, some of which are collected in her work, *Passions of the Mind* (1993), also contribute to my understanding of her theories about the writing process.

In my examination of the novel, the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly those relating to the influence of the novel form on other literary genres, are pertinent to my study. I will also consider some postmodernist aspects by referring to Brian McHale's detailed discussion of postmodernist fiction.

The two primary texts in my examination of biography, *Dickens*, by Peter Ackroyd, and *Possession: A Romance*, by A.S. Byatt are works from different genres. I have chosen these works for two reasons. Firstly, they constitute an examination of biography. They do this individually as metabiographies, both works operating at the interface of genre and academic address. The second reason is that, together, the two works provide a way of examining the interaction between the novel and biography. Together, too, they form a dialectic on the subject of
biography. Since Ackroyd's text tests the boundaries of fiction and biography, it seems appropriate to measure his biography against a work of fiction which is concerned with biography.

There is a considerable amount of critical writing regarding A.S. Byatt's novel, Possession, but I have been unable to trace extended responses to Ackroyd's biography, Dickens, other than a detailed review, written by A.S. Byatt in 1991, for The Washington Post Book World. Many contemporary speakers and writers about the theory of biography, however, allude to Ackroyd's biography on Dickens, and also to the position taken by Byatt in Possession on a number of biographical issues. I draw on these references for my work.

One writer, to whom I am particularly indebted, is the award-winning biographer and novelist, Victoria Glendinning. Her discussion of biographical issues, both within the course of her work and in a personal interview, provides a middle ground from which to examine the biographical issues raised by Ackroyd and Byatt. A transcript of the interview with Glendinning can be found in an Appendix, attached to this thesis. Despite her disclaimer regarding the theory of
biography, that she "didn't know there was any" (Appendix: 1), Glendinning has strong views on many issues of biography, the most central of which is a belief that the biographer has the right to be as innovative as he or she likes. This, in her view, is directly related to the artistic potential of biography. In her interview, Glendinning concedes that a theoretical basis probably provides her with a "drive, or shaping force", even though she may not be aware of it (Appendix: 1). My intention, in this thesis, is to bring an awareness of the existing theoretical basis of biography to the surface, as well as making an original contribution to this area of scholarship.

In *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (1984), Ira Nadel suggests a number of reasons why there has been resistance to the development of a modern theory of biography. It is not the diversity of biographical form, nor is it lack of interest, or a perception that the form is not important. According to Nadel, the main barrier to a Poetics of biography has been the inability of readers to perceive it as an aesthetic subject. Nadel cites Michael Holroyd who noted that "non-fiction is regarded by many critics as non-creative" (1984: 152). Another reason given by Nadel for the reluctance of critics to theorise about biography
is their anxiety about the psychological approach used by uninformed biographers. The final barrier, Nadel suggests, is critics' dislike of an over-reliance on the life as the source for an understanding of the work. All of these barriers are confronted by Byatt and Ackroyd and, read together, the two metabiographies provide a balanced perspective on these and other concerns.

In *The Art of Literary Biography*, Ken Robinson begins his essay, "John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester: An Author in Search of a Character", by commenting that

> It would be odd if any biographer in the 1990s believed that biography is 'life without theory', that it is possible to see the subject's life as in itself it really was (in Batchelor ed. 1995, 101).

From the perspective of the range of reputable late twentieth-century writers appearing, and alluded to, in *The Art of Literary Biography* (1995), it would appear that biography, the 'bastard' child of invention and truth, is coming of age, and their theories are a consequence of this perception. Amongst these scholars
are Byatt and Ackroyd, and this thesis is concerned with their notion of biography as 'life with theory'. It constitutes a legitimation of the genre and of its associated Poetics.

As a biography, Ackroyd's work is just as dangerous and ill-behaved as Richard Holmes claims biography to be (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 15). His text epitomises the practice of biography in the twentieth century, noted by Nadel, for it has "reasserted experimentation, linking itself to fiction rather than history" (1984: 185). It can be categorised as metabiography because, in addition to telling the life story of Charles Dickens, Ackroyd indicates his interest in many of the problematic issues of biography. As well as employing rhetorical devices and authorial asides concerning the construction of biography, his ingenious method of writing the biography effectively foregrounds a number of theoretical issues. Ackroyd brings the author to life in a mimetic biography. By adopting many of the stylistic devices used by his subject, Ackroyd fictionalises the work and offers great scope for a reader interested in theoretical issues of biography. In his test of the boundaries of fact and fiction, Ackroyd raises issues of definition. By experimenting with the form of story, Ackroyd shows that the
biographer has the power of creating a fiction, even perhaps contributing to the making of a legend. In this way, he signals issues of authority and truth in biography. Moreover, although *Dickens* was written in 1990, it subscribes to the Victorian tradition in which biography is a male contract: the male voice tells the life of a significant nineteenth-century man. Thus the biography offers the reader a model whereby issues of authority relating to engendered biography may be examined. Finally, by providing a biography which shapes factual material into a creative textual design, Ackroyd challenges the notion that biography is not an aesthetic subject. Thus he deals, both overtly, and covertly, with a range of theoretical issues of biography.

Byatt's work, although in the form of a novel, is also, I would argue, a metabiography. The subject matter of the novel is concerned with issues of biography, and by this means she theorises about the genre. In her use of the creative mode of fiction to address theoretical issues of biography, she elides the potential refusal of critics to interest themselves in theorising about biography. Byatt's work complements that of Ackroyd, for she not only deals with issues of authority,
textuality and truth in biography, but also considers the nature of the biographer. Her novel traces the possible lifestyles of the illegitimate child, biography, pointing to the ways it might be legitimated, and widening its parameters to include the female signature. Her work is an examination of the genre of biography and of biographers.

A.S. Byatt's novel, Possession: A Romance, has been described by one critic for Cosmopolitan as a "satire on the modern biography industry". In this mode, Byatt addresses issues of biography which include the integrity of a biographer, his/her interest in conveying the truth about the subject and ability to do so. Being at the mercy of unscrupulous biographers has been a matter of anxiety for many literary figures, and Byatt joins Thomas Hardy, Henry James, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, to name but a few major writers, in expressing this concern in various ways.

One character in Possession, an unflattering portrait of an American biographer, Mortimer Cropper, is a vehicle for Byatt's examination of truth in biography, and the questioning of the biographer's authority to tell a life story. Maud Bailey and
Roland Michell, the two pivotal characters in *Possession*, are another avenue for Byatt's critique on the issues of authority and truth in biography. The two young scholars provide a contrast to Cropper, for their story is a more positive view of the biographical and the critical project. Although Maud and Roland are primarily critical scholars, their quest for biographical information about the writers, whom they love, energises and enlightens them. The experience gives them a wider perspective of the essence, or origin, of literary art. Moreover, Maud's authoritative female voice, and her interest in the previously neglected life and poetry of the fictional Christabel LaMotte, balances that of the male scholar, Roland, whose interest has been in the celebrated fictional poet, Randolph Henry Ash. Thus attention is directed by Byatt to the relationship between gender and the genre of biography.

Byatt's and Ackroyd's works, then, both have a metabiographical intent, although they are categorised in different genres. Ackroyd's work takes the form of a fictionalised biography while Byatt narrativises issues of biography in her critique of the genre. The works reveal some similarities as well as differences in the writers' beliefs about biography and, by
virtue of the fact that they offer balancing arguments on theoretical issues, the two works in conjunction provide a fruitful source of examination. They offer the opportunity to examine the essential nature and parameters of biography. The two works uncover the elusiveness of 'truth' and 'reality' in the worlds created by writers of non-fictional forms. By means of their different perspectives, it is possible to consider the validity of a world view which is limited to a man's perspective, and focussed on an individual man's life. The question of the aesthetic properties of biography is also illuminated by reading both texts.

Chapter 1 of this thesis examines issues of definition of biography by means of the intersection of these works. In this chapter, I will explore the parameters of biography; its nature, subjects, purposes and methods will be considered. The qualities of the biographer, and the extent of his or her creative licence, will also be examined in this chapter. Chapter 2 will be concerned with the issues of truth and authority in biography. I will examine the problematics of biography's primary claim: to transmit the truth of its subject's life. The issue of the biographer's authoritative stance, and the debate
over the interpretative role of the biographer, and the use of psychoanalysis in biography also come within the scope of this chapter. Chapter 3 is concerned with the critique by Byatt and Ackroyd of traditional authority assumed by male biographers with regard to the representation of women. By reading the two authors' works together, I will demonstrate how fruitful is an examination of another 'dark area', the lives of women, to give us a wider understanding of a world removed from our own. Chapter 4 will analyse the relationship between textuality and the transmission of the life of a subject in biography. The balance of aesthetic and factual elements in biography, and the questions thus generated about fictionality in biography, are addressed in this chapter.

My intention, then, is to contribute to the Poetics of biography by examining a number of issues raised by Byatt and Ackroyd. My aim in this thesis is to synthesise the ideas about biography addressed by these authors and by a range of literature related to the genre of biography. Although my focus is on biographies concerning writers, I use the terms biography and literary biography interchangeably since, as Chapter 1 explains, there are reasons for disputing the traditional
definitions of literary biography. In my examination of biography I will test its claim to be a twentieth-century literary art, and contribute to the growing body of theory which attends that designation.
Chapter one

Biography and literary biography: issues of definition

When theorising about biography, a starting point must be an attempt to define the genre. I will argue that as part of their function as metabiographies, *Dickens* and *Possession* both reveal a position on this issue in their critiques of biography. *Dickens* assists in the formulation of a definition, since it is in itself a somewhat radical exemplar. Ackroyd, in fact, pushes the parameters of biography extremely close to fiction, problematising whether his work should be categorised as a biography at all. The effect is to link biography with fiction, conceding that a certain amount of interpretative licence may be taken, while still purporting to transmit the actual life of a subject. Byatt reaches a definition indirectly, by showing a negative model of a biography and a biographer, and by demonstrating the process whereby a legitimate biography might be constructed. Together, *Dickens* and *Possession* build on the understandings reached by other writers and scholars of what constitutes a biography.
The terms 'biography' and 'literary biography' are used interchangeably in much of the literature about literary biography, though the veteran biographer, Leon Edel, isolates literary biography from general discussion of the biographical art. He defines it in *Literary Biography* as "the writing of the lives of men and women who were themselves writers" (1957: 2). Edel claims that literary biography differs from other categories of biography in the nature of the subject and "corollary questions of emphasis and shading" (1957: 2). In this way, he problematises the definition of literary biography by introducing the question of balance between literary criticism and the life experience of the writer. Other theoreticians make little distinction between literary biography and the biographical art as a whole. James Clifford, for instance, simply refers to biography "as a single definable genre" in *From Puzzles to Portraits* (1979: 101), without distinguishing between biographies about writers and other public figures. The assumption which appears to be made, though, in these and other discussions of the genre, is that biography is an overarching term, while literary biography refers to the narrower sub-genre concerned with the writing of a life of an
An Examination of Biography

It is the history of an author which is usually framed by the world in which he or she lived, and which might incorporate a critical element with regard to the subject's work. But this definition is too simplistic to encompass some of the possibilities which recent directions in literary biography have tested. Byatt and Ackroyd's critiques of biography show that its parameters are rather more flexible.

Literary biography has traditionally been read for the connections it makes between the author and his or her work, though recent trends in biography writing, and a growing readership, have complicated this motivation. Readers might well be attracted to reading about the psychology of writers' lives, for instance, rather than about their art, because the psychological development of writers, like other artists, is often forced beyond the customary constraints of most people. An example of a biography less concerned with the literature, and more with the life of the author is *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West*, in which Victoria Glendinning approaches the biography primarily as "an adventure story" (1984: xviii). She insists that it is "not a work of literary criticism" (1984: xvii), although she characterises and quotes from her subject's
An Examination of Biography

writings. The biography focuses on the personality of Vita Sackville-West. Sackville-West’s writing is peripheral, being used to explicate the events of her life and her personality, not the reverse. Since its focus is on the idiosyncratic life, rather than on the work of the author, one wonders if this work can still be deemed literary biography.

Literary biography traditionally shares with biographies of other prominent figures, beyond the scope of this discussion, the intense interest by a very wide readership, in the major achievements as well as the everyday circumstances, interactions and behaviours, of a person of stature. In "Starting Again", an essay in The Art of Literary Biography, Ann Thwaite gives the startling figure of "2,164 biographies (about 40 a week) apparently published in Britain in 1990" (in Batchelor ed.1995: 205). One of these was Ackroyd’s biography of Dickens. It is a fair assumption that Byatt’s Possession, also published in 1990, is a fictional response to this inflation of interest in biography in the latter part of the twentieth century. The extent of public interest in all manner of biographies invites conjecture about the reasons for this phenomenon. There must, for instance, be more to reading a literary biography than the
desire to increase one's literary understanding of the works of a celebrated author.

A complicating factor is that attitudes to what constitutes 'literature' have varied in different periods. Is the term "literary biography" reserved only for writers whose work is established in the traditional canon? A good case in point concerns the letters or journals of Victorian women which, after their diminished status in the nineteenth century, are viewed by twentieth-century readers as a literary genre in their own right. The great interest generated by these writings, and the admiration which they provoke, suggests that their creators are worthy subjects of biography on the strength of their literary accomplishments.

In *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England 1830-1880* (1993), Dorothy Mermin explains the constraints which restricted much of women's writing in the nineteenth century: conflicting family responsibilities, and the misogynistic literary market place, put pressures on women who entered the public sphere. The price of celebrity was high, according to Mermin, and "fille publique", the old term for a prostitute, was
still used to describe women whose writing attracted public notice (1993: xiv). Alternative, acceptable forms of writing for women in Victorian England, such as travel diaries, letters and journals, were viewed as sub-genres to mainstream, canonical writing. To deny the accomplishments of women writing in the nineteenth century because their work was defined out of traditional genres, is to repeat the inflexible patterns of the academic establishment of the period. Books about the lives, and the modes of writing of these women of letters might, arguably, be defined as literary biography.

Equivocations of this kind have made it more difficult to discriminate between biography and literary biography, and thus to reach a definition of the sub-genre of literary biography. The metabiographies, Possession and Dickens, provide different perspectives on this issue, although both of the texts are concerned with biography about literary figures. In contrast with the subject of Ackroyd's biography, a celebrated author who was well established and critically successful, even in his own lifetime, Byatt's fictional subjects include writers from the public and the private spheres. The two works, read together, generate questions about what constitutes an
appropriate subject of a work, if it is to be defined as literary biography.

A further shift in definition must be made if we are to accommodate, within the parameters of literary biography, works which are primarily about less celebrated figures who had some connections with writers. Ann Thwaite's biography-in-process of Emily Tennyson is one such work, and is of interest to this discussion, since it bears, to some degree, on Possession. In The Art of Literary Biography, Thwaite cites Larkin's lines about Emily Tennyson, who

\begin{verbatim}
looked after (Tennyson's) clothes
saw to his food and drink
entertained visitors
protected him from gossip and criticism
And finally
(apart from running the household)
Brought up and educated the children.
\end{verbatim}

While all this was going on
Mister Alfred Tennyson sat like a baby
Perhaps the term, literary biography, should include the lives of those who facilitate, or influence the lives of authors, even when, as in the case of Emily Tennyson, her writings are mainly limited to domestic details. Thwaite's mention of Emily Tennyson's address book, with the size of the poet's head listed under the address of his hatter is an extreme example of source material which can hardly be considered literature (in Batchelor ed 1995: 208).

Another complicating factor is the Victorian notion of public and private lives. A legacy of the Victorian period, which Virginia Woolf challenged, was the belief that women belonged to the private domain in which the experiences were often considered too trivial to be of interest. Should Thwaite's life of Emily Tennyson be classified as literary biography, when her life did not encroach on the public sphere? According to Victoria Glendinning, the main problem in resurrecting the lives of many Victorian wives was that they were often so limited, or at least, the records that remain are limited in interest. "The life of a nineteenth-century housemaid or parlourmaid ... would be fascinating, but there's no material, so you'd have to write a novel" (Appendix : 35). For Glendinning, Thwaite's
biography about Emily Tennyson is unsatisfactory because, although Thwaite is a very good writer

all she could deal with was the domestic intricacy in between what was happening in [Tennyson's] public life. The truth is that a lot of women's lives were, in terms of a modern woman, boring and insignificant. They might have had fierce imaginations, but you can't get at them. Nothing happened" (Appendix : 9 ).

In "Woolf and 'The Proper Writing of Lives'", Julia Briggs claims that, when considering the problems in writing about the lives of marginalised women and the obscure, Woolf admitted that "their silence created a supreme difficulty, but also an artistic opportunity for the writer who could picture their lives or find words for them to speak" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 248). Like Glendinning, Woolf's solution to the quandary was, ultimately, to resort to fiction, yet she remained ambivalent about the issue to the end. Batchelor, the editor of the text, The Art of Literary Biography (1995), shows his openness to the debate by including Thwaite's discussion about her biography of Emily Tennyson in his collection of essays about literary biography.
Byatt addresses the theoretical issue of secondary lives in biography by means of her characterisation of Ellen Ash. There are resonances of Emily Tennyson in the characterisation of the fictional Ellen Ash in Possession which suggest that Byatt, too, is of the opinion that literary biography need not deal solely with celebrated writers. Unlike that of Emily Tennyson, however, the life of Ellen Ash could well bear the weight of a biography, because Byatt is able, in her novel, to decode Ellen's writings to reveal a woman of great complexity. Ellen Ash is an intriguing representation of Victorian life, and her rhetorical style is of interest. Thus she would be a fine subject for a biography, in her own right, as well as being a significant secondary life in the biography of the fictional poet, Ash.

Phyllis Rose shows that discussion of secondary lives, in order to give a fuller understanding of celebrated lives, does not need to result in an unmanageable and unwieldy biography. In Parallel Lives (1994), she writes about groups of interconnected lives in the Victorian period. Rose's "Catherine Hogarth & Charles Dickens", for instance, offers a differently balanced portrait of Dickens' essential personality than that provided by Ackroyd, since Rose gives extra emphasis to his
wife. A more realistic appraisal of Dickens' personality is made, it might be argued, when the conjunction of their lives is stressed.

Rose offers an interesting approach to the dilemma of whether to define as 'literary' the project of retrieving secondary lives that might not be writers in the accepted sense. She sees her biographies as literary because "living is an act of creativity ... at certain moments, the need to decide upon the story of our own lives becomes particularly pressing" (1994: 14). She widens the narrative act to the choices made by people in arranging the design of their own lives, claiming that "to the extent that we impose some narrative form onto our lives, each of us in the ordinary process of living is a fitful novelist, and the biographer is a literary critic" (1994: 14). If one accepts this notion, the scope of literary biography is widened to the point of dissolution of the boundaries between biography and literary biography. Although each of the biographies in Parallel Lives is about a writer and his or her partner, if one reacts to the spirit rather than the letter of Rose's argument, all biography is literary biography. Perhaps the distinction is unnecessary.
According to most biographers and scholars, however, there is more to literary biography than the ability to construct a life story. Byatt and Ackroyd are among those who theorise that, in order to arrive at a definition of literary biography, it is important to have an understanding of the term 'literary', and this, both writers imply, is closely related to the nature of the biographer. The interest of Byatt and Ackroyd in biography is not only in its characteristics and subjects, but also in its generative power, and regarding this issue the two works transmit similar ideas. Byatt uses fiction to demonstrate that it is the quality of a biography which determines its categorisation as a literary genre, not its subject. As a practitioner, Ackroyd supplies a model, to make this point. In it he emphasises the literary element, thus demonstrating that his biography is more than a simple catalogue of assembled facts. Ackroyd puts theory into practice in order to reach a definition of literary biography.

The distinction between biography and literary biography, then, is further problematised by the argument that the most important criterion for literary biography is the artistry of the
work. Since this criterion might also apply to the wider field of biography, the distinction is somewhat arbitrary. For this reason, in addition to the question of what constitutes a proper subject for literary biography, the terms are used interchangeably.

A defining feature of biography, according to Byatt's narrative, is its power to change people's lives in some way. In Possession, Byatt shows that literary biography can illuminate an author's work, and demonstrates why a literary biography needs to focus on more than an isolated life of an author if a full picture of the life is to emerge. Furthermore, she concentrates on the relationship between biography and the biographer, and the effect of one on the other. She explores the underlying motivations, the subjectivity, and the effect that writing a biography has on the lives of biographers. Byatt implies that the inspirational quality of literary biography and its power to illuminate literature are determined by the biographer. If his or her motivations are questionable, or if the biographer has serious personality problems, it will impact on the writing. As Glendinning puts it: "You're either a responsible person or an irresponsible person, whether you're writing a
biography or going to Harrods. You carry yourself with you" (Appendix: 25). According to Glendinning, a biographer of integrity is more likely to produce a quality product.

Byatt conveys her views on this issue by means of her fictional biographer, Cropper, who is characterised as a man of highly questionable honesty and integrity. She satirises both Cropper and his biography fiercely, establishing her position. Cropper’s work, Byatt implies, can not be classed as a literary product. She asserts that the biographer is a factor which must be taken into account.

An examination of her work indicates, moreover, that Byatt defines literary biography as that which touches the lives of those who are concerned with it. In "Know the Past: Know Thyself. Literary pursuits and quest for identity in A.S Byatt’s Possession and F. Duranti’s Effetti Personal"", Guiliana Giobbi claims that "the facts of the past are not important in themselves, but in the influence they have upon us, in what we can learn from them, both in the negative and in the positive sense" (1994: 52). Giobbi comments about the way both the plot, and Byatt's "meta-fictional remarks" emphasise that the
bi-product of the biographical search is self-knowledge (1994: 46). Byatt shows us the transformation of two dispirited academics who invigorate their own life through the search for another's. The hero, Roland, is surprised by the effect, on his previously apathetic existence, of the desire for knowledge about the life of his subject. When confronted with the treasure of the hidden correspondence between Ash and LaMotte, he feels

as though he was being uselessly urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity - not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge ... He wanted to ask and ask (P: 82-85).

Roland, however, is not fully aware of his motivations. "It wasn't profit " (P: 50), he insists, and later says, "We aren't looking for scandals" (P: 86). He tries to explain that because Ash wrote to Christabel about his poetry, he, Roland, could learn to understand Ash's poetry better by reading the letters. Later he repeats: "The importance is literary" (P: 89). But the subtext, the personal importance of the discovery to Roland, is revealed when he tells Maud: "I wanted them [the purloined
papers] to be a secret. Private. And to do the work” (*P : 50*).

Roland's need for challenge and self-fulfilment is evident. It overrides his deep affinity with Ash, and the clear evidence that both he and LaMotte wanted their secret preserved. Roland's quest is to understand his own identity and capabilities.

Ackroyd shares with Byatt the belief that a literary biography should have a positive effect on those who write it, or read it, and he, too, suggests that it is something to do with their desire for knowledge about their own lives. In "Starting Again", Ann Thwaite reports a comment made by Ackroyd that "the subject of a biography is the biographer, not the subject" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 207). Ackroyd also tells us that, at times, looking at Dickens or his public, "the years between his time and our own vanish. And we are looking at ourselves" (*D : xv*). Like Byatt, Ackroyd's interest in literary biography is that, in some way, the writing of an author's life provides biographers and readers with a touchstone of human experience. Ackroyd claims that the strong drive towards biography, by biographers and readers, is because it helps them to measure and make sense of their own experience.
The work of other theorists complements and supports the issues of definition raised by Byatt and Ackroyd. An acknowledgement of the irresistible drive to trace biographical information is made by Leon Edel. He, too, recognises that the central quest in literary biography is related to the personal growth and fulfilment of the biographer and his readers. His admiration for, and interest in his subject, Henry James, did not extend to his acceding to James' desire to evade the clutches of a biographer. James' aversion to any such intrusion into his "table-drawers and pockets" is described in full by Edel in *Literary Biography* (1957: 29). Edel admits that in essays written by James, in his burning of the correspondence of years, and in the message that is evident in his novel, *The Aspern Papers*, James makes his wishes quite clear: to withstand the siege of future biographers. Edel's wry comment on the partial failure of James' measures, however, reveals the inevitability of a biography being written despite the elusiveness of the potential subject if the biographer is persistent: "The subject of a biography may throw up road-blocks, but he can never stop the traffic - any more than can the biographer" (1957: 32). Edel makes no apology for his own inability to resist the traffic, and
overlooks the obvious fact that he might be seen as the embodiment of the "publishing scoundrel" whom James denounces in *The Aspern Papers* (1956). For Edel, then, literary biography has more significance than its relationship to the author's work. It is also related to his own drive for knowledge and self-fulfilment.

According, then, to the evidence of the early theoretician, Edel, and the more current views expressed in the metabiographies of Byatt and Ackroyd, the biographer’s part in the equation of what constitutes a biography is related to his or her ability to invest the biography with a transforming quality for both the biographer and the reader. There are commonalities to be found, moreover, in *Possession* and *Dickens*, on how the biographer achieves this powerful effect when writing biography.

It would appear that Byatt and Ackroyd consider that the generative power of a biography begins with the biographer finding the most meaningful and credible way of conveying the subject's life. This involves the balance of three factors. The first of these is the importance the biographer places on
material evidence being presented in the biography, and its multidimensional quality. The second distinguishes between the externals, the actions and events of the subject's life, and the importance of the inner life of the subject. The third factor is whether the fragmentary pieces which have been retrieved from the jigsaw are a good representation of the subject's life, when simply presented by the biographer. Is the biographer's duty, then, to synthesise them by using interpretation and creative imagination? These considerations, discernible in the metabiographies of Byatt and Ackroyd, are part of a body of literature which goes some way towards a Poetics of literary biography. It attempts to define it, to delineate its parameters, and to examine the processes of its construction.

It is helpful to refer to earlier theorisation on the different types of biography, when examining the texts of Byatt and Ackroyd, since their definitions have particular relevance to some of the issues of definition addressed by the writers of the works under consideration. In Literary Biography (1957), Edel identifies three types of literary biography which represent the different emphasis placed on material evidence about the subject, the public events, or the subject's inner life. Having
established that it is *literary* biography he is discussing, Edel proceeds to refer to it as 'biography', which suggests that his discussion has a wider application than literary biography. According to Edel, the chronicle biography, the traditional documentary biography, emphasises the importance to biography of documentary evidence through which the voice of the subject is heard as much as possible. He also considers the perspective of connected lives to be important. This type of biography has an autobiographical element as a result of the reliance on letters and private papers. The implication is that, in this way, the reader is privy to the world of the person who is, as it were, telling it directly. Edel makes the point that the validity of this kind of biography relies primarily on the authority gained by the literary figure's own documents, or documents about him or her written by those who were closest to the subject. The material is usually simply presented in chronological fashion in a traditional chronicle biography. There is a minimum of comment by the biographer, and, in Edel's experience, there is little synthesis of materials in chronicle biographies to illuminate the meaning of isolated events.

The second type of biography, identified by Edel, is the
pictorial biography, an approach which calls more strongly for the mediating effect of the biographer. It is required, according to Edel, when the emphasis in writing the life is to show what is hidden behind the surface actions and behaviours which are exhibited to the world. Edel claims that this method involves the biographer pinpointing the significant traits, and laying bare the personality of the subject in the same way as an artist draws a portrait. On the broad canvas of background and events of the subject's life, the biographer places a small frame around one characteristic part of it. Edel points out that the method is non-developmental, and does not show the relationship between context and individual works to a great degree. The criterion is not comprehensiveness, but to catch the essential man or woman behind the work.

The third type of biography is one which bears particularly on the issues of definition in Ackroyd's and Byatt's metabiographies. Edel calls it the pictorial-narrative or novelistic biography. He describes it as one which strikes a course between the documented 'life' and the portrait, complicating the attempt to arrive at a definition of what it means to 'write a life'. The parameters of biography, in this
method, are more blurred. The biographer characterises, comments, analyses and interprets on the basis of documentary evidence which does not, itself, appear extensively in the biography. As Edel puts it in *The Literary Biographer*, once the biographer has "saturated himself with his documents ... he [sic] may cut himself free from their bondage without cutting himself free from their truth" (1957: 88). There is no strict adherence to chronology, Edel claims; the biographer selects and synthesises material which he deems provides a pattern. He also uses the tools of psychology and psycho-analysis to reach an understanding of the behaviour of the subject. Edel qualifies this by adding that the biographer attempts to do this, given the difficulties posed by the absence of the subject. The biographer's subject is not the captive client on the psychologist's, or psychiatrist's couch.

Ackroyd follows this model of literary biography in *Dickens*, and experiments with these elements: reliance on documentary evidence, chronology and interpretative comment. His work reveals his desire to liberate his biography from traditional definitions, while still being "taken seriously" as a legitimate biography (*D*: 941). In *Possession*, Byatt, too, explores the
problems of interpretative comment by the biographer and its relationship with legitimate biography. Questions regarding the factual basis of interpretative devices, including the validity of psycho-analysis and psychology as tools to construct personality profiles in biography, are discussed more fully in Chapter 2, in relation to an examination of truth in biography. The issues, however, are also pertinent to an examination of the parameters of biography, and the two metabiographies, *Possession* and *Dickens*, provide a range of perspectives from which to examine these elements.

Edel's theory is relevant to an examination of the intersection of the metabiographies, *Dickens* and *Possession*, as it helps to identify the issues underlying definitions of biography. The biographer may borrow the methods of a psycho-analyst, but it is questionable whether, as a practitioner, he or she has access to the deepest reaches of the subject's consciousness. The issues of interpretation include the degree to which the biographer may borrow from the devices of a novelist before the work becomes fiction. Finally, an important issue emerges in the two metabiographies. Is it legitimate biographical practice to draw conclusions about the subject's
consciousness from the work? If this is a valid method of understanding the inner being of a writer, we might tend to question the need for literary biography when we have the oeuvre for examination.

James Clifford's discussion, fifteen years later, is also useful as a benchmark for issues of definition which can be discerned in Byatt's and Ackroyd's metabiographies. In his text *From Puzzles to Portraits*, an account of the practice of biographical research and the application of its findings, Clifford describes types of biographies as being "without any uniformity in the labels" (1970: 84). These types are situated on a continuum beginning with the biography which is as objective as it can possibly be, although Clifford acknowledges that an objective biography is not really possible. The 'objective biography' consists of an assembling of evidence without editorial comment and without narratorial structure. Of course, the subjective element comes into play merely in the selection of what the researcher considers valid evidence. It is significant that Clifford refers to "the researcher" or "the author" (1970: 84), rather than 'the biographer', which might perhaps be taken as his covert dismissal of this type as
legitimate biography.

The opposite pole is a purely subjective, fictionalised account, which relies purely on secondary sources. Clifford draws a clear line which excludes these subjective creations from consideration as "authentic reference works" (1970: 88). The term, 'novelist-biographer', suggests that, according to Clifford, the biographer has gone beyond acceptable parameters of what might properly be defined as biography.

Moving with some fluidity along the continuum, Clifford observes, are the 'scholarly-historical' biography, the 'artistic-scholarly' biography, and the 'narrative' biography. The first placement uses no fictional devices; the last is almost fictional in form, although "not pure fiction", because it is firmly based on documentary evidence (1979: 87). The 'scholarly-historical' biographer openly confesses any guesswork if real evidence is lacking, but this does not include psychological interpretation of the subject's behaviours. By the terms of Clifford's definition, the 'artistic-scholarly' biography is based on solid research, but the biographer then presents the material in as lively, and as imaginative a fashion as possible, without
fabricating events and scenes which never happened. The 'narrative' biography, again by Clifford's definition, narrativises the material; in it documents are reconstituted into dramatic scenes and dialogue, and colour is added to the 'factual' material.

It is instructive to examine Dickens within this scheme of determining legitimacy of biography, because it is the informing principle of Ackroyd's definition. Clifford's method of differentiating types of biography is really about the biographer's agency in projecting a credible 'life', and it comes close to determining where biography stops and prose narrative begins. Through the construction of his biography, Ackroyd clarifies his sense of the boundaries of biography by pushing them as far as he deems possible, but we must assume that he considers that he has not compromised his role as a biographer. Ackroyd insists on the importance of factual and imaginative elements in biography, and yet clearly delineates the two elements. He signals the limits of imagination by structural devices, and by open acknowledgement of his speculations. If Dickens can be categorised, it is an 'artistic-scholarly' biography verging on 'narrative' biography. Although Ackroyd
includes narrativised and dramatised segments in the text, he clearly indicates that they are the products of his imagination, not derived directly from documentary material. He directs reader attention to the risks taken, indicating his intention of exploring these theoretical issues, along with the life of his subject.

Ackroyd tests how far, and under what conditions, the fictional element might be allowed to intrude into biography without corrupting its classification as biography. He claims a factual basis for his biography, although the minimal number of footnotes or specific citation of sources inclines it towards narrative biography. On his own evidence, Ackroyd dismisses scholarly footnotes as a "farcical practice" (D: 942). He claims that the 'little essays' on his sources which follow the main text of the biography are merely concessions to traditional biography, and are "a sort of confidence trick" (D: 941). He denies that careful documentation of sources is actually a claim to the factual basis of the biography.

It is evident that the issue of documentation is one which preoccupied Ackroyd when he was writing *Dickens*, as it is one
of the discussion points in the 'interview' which is inserted in his work. In her review of *Dickens*, in *The Washington Post Book World* (1991), Byatt does not miss the opportunity to make an observation about Ackroyd's self-consciousness with regard to the fictional element in his biography. She describes the segment in *Dickens* which simulates a transcript of an interview, as "Ackroyd's Ackroyd, interviewed by Ackroyd" (1991: 2). Byatt thus implies that, at the level of what purports to be a confessional discussion, and while defending the fictional element in 'his' *Dickens*, Ackroyd is also constructing a fictional version of himself. It might be argued that Ackroyd is making a pre-emptive strike against anticipated criticism of the fictional weighting of his biography, but it is also arguable that he inserts the interview to emphasise his intention to explore this, and other theoretical concerns, in the form of a metabiography. In either case, his work caters for the current interest in theory and experiment with the genre of biography.

Throughout the work, Ackroyd pursues this course of examining issues of interest in the genre of biography, and while testing its boundaries, defends its categorisation as a biography. He reveals the *process* by which he understands the
facts he has gathered. He assures readers that the biography is thoroughly researched, but confesses the liberties he took with the 'factual' material, in order to write a coherent narrative. He openly confesses contradictions, or lack of solid evidence, and integrates inventive and imaginative elements into the scholarly, expository writing.

In a documentary film based on *Dickens*, produced and directed by David Thomas in 1991, the presenter, Melvin Bragg, questions Ackroyd about whether a biographer has the right to break all the rules about biography. Ackroyd's response is that the risks he takes in *Dickens* are only expressing openly what is inherent in all biographies:

*I was always aware of the latent fictional elements in any work of biography. One part of my brain wanted to bring them out into the open, to make the unconscious, conscious* (1991).

It is clear, in an examination of *Dickens*, that another part of his brain wanted to make the implicit, explicit, and to invite speculation on the 'latent fictional elements' of biography.
When Ackroyd uses fictional devices to present his evidence in as lively a fashion as possible, he is testing Clifford's definition of the 'artistic-scholarly' type, situating his biographical method loosely within this category. His biography of Dickens further flouts Clifford's definition, for conversations and events are, at times, invented. These are *clearly defined*, however, and separated from the main text. The definition of biography which emerges from an examination of Dickens, tests Edel's prohibition, supported by Clifford in *From Puzzles to Portraits* that, although imagination plays an important part for the biographer, "he must not imagine the materials" (1970: 85).

Ackroyd creates scenes in which Dickens, his characters and the writer or, as he is styled, the interviewer, interact in London, and in one case, in a carnival atmosphere in Greenwich, in the Victorian period. There is, however, a line drawn between factual materials, and the imaginative response and speculation which those materials generate. Imaginative/creative passages are included to enliven the biography and to draw attention to the merging of the
biographical with the novel form. Moreover, Ackroyd's methodology has the added effect of drawing attention to the literary element of biography. The passages, clearly identified by Ackroyd as fictional, are distinct from the comprehensive life, rooted in the record which, according to Nadel, was the archetypal nineteenth-century biography (1984: 185). The effect is to create a striking contrast and, in this way, to draw attention to generic boundaries, and thus to examine definitions of biography. The issues will be dealt with more fully in Chapter 4, which deals with textuality in biography, and looks particularly at the appropriation of novelistic techniques by the biographer, and how this practice has changed the face of biography.

Ackroyd delimits his 'flights of fancy' from the body of the biography by means of structural signposting and direct authorial comment, but the presence of these elements in the biography suggests a certain ambivalence with regard to generic boundaries. The imaginary passages, which Ackroyd interpolates into the biography, foreground a number of the issues of biography, including the idea that there is an essential truth in art which transcends boundaries imposed by time, form
or medium. In Interlude 111, Ackroyd examines a number of aspects of truth and fictionality in art. Like most of the interludes, this segment has a subversive effect and offers a challenge to the scrupulously documented, and supposedly objective, biography. By means of this segment, Ackroyd implies that the structural signposting and rhetorical devices which he has imposed on *Dickens* are, in fact, artificial.

"A true conversation between imagined selves" (*D: 450*) is the introduction to Interlude 111, a segment in which he animates Eliot, Wilde, Chatterton and Dickens. They engage in a conversation about the nature of truth, identity, and the network of relationships which links all the texts produced by a culture. The fact that the conversation cannot be 'true' is self-evident, given the different eras in which the writers lived. Yet the notion of literature as a conversation between all the writers and readers in a culture implies that we cannot know where any one text begins or ends. Literature has played its part in our composite 'selves'. Wilde, Eliot and Chatterton, together, say: "You are part of us. Of me" (*D: 455*). They mean that we cannot comprehend another individual as an entity, separate from ourselves, or from others. The 'character',
Dickens, says: "All writing is a form of revelation, by which we can move in the shadowy world and borrow from there all the emblems and images which comprehend our own state" (D: 453). Ackroyd's doubts are laid bare, about the validity of generic boundaries, of claims of objectivity or originality, and of the possibility of separating the factual from the imaginative, in biography.

Ackroyd also examines the parameters of biography, with regard to the factual and creative elements, by inserting discursive passages into the biographical narrative which express his imaginative involvement in Dickens' world. When he does so, he indicates this practice to the reader. For instance, he links the creation of the scene about the fatal storm at sea which David Copperfield experienced, with an image of Dickens in his house at Broadstairs. He asks: "Is it too fanciful to imagine Dickens lying in his own room, listening to the wind and water of Broadstairs and revolving so many matters in his head?" (D: 634). Through direct comment, Ackroyd makes it clear that the imagination of a biographer is necessarily stimulated by immersion in his material, and points to the impulse to present these imaginings as genuine events.
There is no shortage of genuine evidence about Dickens' life at Ackroyd's disposal, and he demonstrates his belief that the biographer must be allowed agency with regard to its use in a biography. It is evident that the biographer's role, according to Ackroyd, is to be the arbiter and selector of material for the biography. In the documentary film, also entitled *Dickens*, which is based on Ackroyd's biography, he explains that his method was to begin "by reading everything by Dickens and everything about Dickens" (1991). In the biography, Ackroyd includes extensive notes and a bibliography, although he does not interpolate the sources of his information into his narrative. In this way, Ackroyd makes the point that there is no simple, logical progression from the accumulation of a plethora of sources to an authentic biography. He claims the authority to present to the reader a distillation of the facts. The reader encounters, with Ackroyd, the problems of the truth value of sources, and observes his use of judgement and intuition, the tools with which these volatile facts are converted, by Ackroyd, into his preferred 'truth'.

An integral part of biography, and an important theoretical
issue, is the interpretative function of the biographer. Most theorists agree, when attempting to define biography, that the interpretation of the disparate facts of the subject's life by a biographer, is what constitutes a biography. In "The Ethics of Biography", an influential essay reprinted in *English Institute Essays*, Andre Maurois asserts that the biographer "has a perfect right, and even a duty, to interpret the facts" (1943: 47). Ackroyd demonstrates that interpretation is a legitimate function of the biographer, but he hesitates between uncertainty and omniscience when he discusses and displays his interpretative role. In the interview included in *Dickens* he admits to the possibility of being quite wrong about some of his interpretations, but he claims that the biographical form "seems to demand certainty and clarity" (*D*: 942). In the biography, *Dickens*, he uses a strategy of professing uncertainty, but follows it up with a confident pronouncement, which sounds remarkably like that of Dickens', which Ackroyd cites: "Trust me to be right. I stand there, and I know" (*D*: 1096). Maurois expresses a similar sentiment when he says:
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[the biographer] had more time than the reader to give to a study of the texts, and also because, having explored with care the whole background of the hero, he has a chance better to understand his motives, and those of his friends or enemies (1942: 47).

Maurois, however, warns against undermining the confidence of the reader by the use of imagination, claiming: "Once you cross the line between biography and fiction, you will never be able to retrace your steps" (1942: 47). It would appear that Ackroyd is constrained by no such fears. But another interpretation of his confident statements is that he is being deliberately imitative. Dickens' insecurities and flexible attitudes to truth were characteristically concealed beneath his dogmatic pronouncements.

Although the issue of truth and authority in biography is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, it is clearly a problematic concept with regard to defining biography, which should be touched on at this point. Ackroyd critiques the issue of authority by enacting the tensions between taking an authoritative position, as a biographer, and being aware of the dangers of doing so. He does this by alternating the two
A notable example of Ackroyd's pattern of alternating uncertainty with certainty is when he deals with the elusive Ellen Ternan and the limited amount of substantial evidence about her relationship with Charles Dickens: "There can be no certainty here" (D: 969), he admits, repeating it at several points of the biography, although when he posits "at least a hypothesis" (D: 967), he does so with a strong tone of authority. Ackroyd argues that it is unlikely

that Mrs Ternan would have accepted - and indeed, on the evidence available, supervised - a relationship which would have turned her daughter, in the eyes of the mid-Victorian world, into little more than a harlot" (D: 969).

He presents, as his main argument against Ellen's role as Dickens' mistress, the 'extraordinary' nature of Dickens, "a genius who held on to his ideal [of a relationship] against all odds" (D: 969) and uses the authority of Dickens' own fiction to support his view that their relationship was not a sexual one. Ackroyd equates Arthur Clennam's love for Little Dorrit with
Dickens' love for Ellen Ternan: "Just as Dickens called Ellen Ternan "my dear girl", so did Clennam call Little Dorrit his "poor child" (D: 966). Moreover, Ackroyd draws on Dickens' fictional "fascination with infant sexuality" (D: 966), arguing that the sexless passion Dickens describes fictionally was a reflection of the type of love he felt for Ellen Ternan. The certainty with which Ackroyd speaks is remarkable, especially when the reader is faced at every turn by instances of the contradictions in Dickens' make-up. "The celebrant of the domestic hearth" in fiction (D: 865), who, in reality, dismissed his wife of twenty-two years, exploiting her powerlessness to keep her children, is surely not a reliable source to use to equate the writer's life and his work.

Ackroyd's treatment of Ternan, however, might also be seen as an instance of Ackroyd's mimetic approach to writing Dickens' biography and, it might be argued, infuses a parodic element into the biography. It is in line with the dichotomous Victorian view of the public and the private domain, with regard to women's lives. These attitudes, which were prevalent in Dickens' era, were shared by Dickens as a matter of course. Read this way, Ackroyd is repeating "the approved stories of
[Dickens'] culture", so-named by Lyndall Gordon in "Women's Lives" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 96). Ackroyd does not extend his examination of the parameters of biography to the "transgressive experiment" which Gordon believes is needed to find the hidden aspect of women's lives in nineteenth-century England (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 96). In this respect, Ackroyd's biography supports Gordon's claim that "what is most distinctive in women's lives is precisely what is most hidden" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 96). The shadowy figure of Ackroyd's Nelly Ternan adds little to our understanding of Dickens, and her lively personality is expunged. When Ackroyd colludes with Dickens in concealing information about Ternan's true nature, and her relationship with Dickens, he simulates the Victorian deference to proprieties, thus critiquing a convention of nineteenth-century biography.

Ackroyd's theoretical position, then, is quite ambiguous on the subtle application of intuition to interpret material, because it is shaded by the mimetic element in the biography. It is evident, though, that the practice is subjective and jeopardises the boundaries between fact and fiction. It is clear that Ackroyd is conscious of this. Indeed, he concedes in his
'interview' segment that he

probably made too much of the fact ... that Dickens saw reality as a reflection of his own fiction. That his novels dominated his understanding of people and even of himself (D: 944).

In fact an examination of Ackroyd's method of reading Dickens' life from his fiction in the biography, *Dickens*, reveals that Ackroyd consciously experiments with a theoretical issue when he demonstrates the use of intuition in his biography. In this way, he indicates his awareness, and implies his theoretical position, that intuition is a legitimate element in the construction of a biography.

Ackroyd also indicates his awareness of the issue of using the writer's work as a legitimate source of information about an author, although he gestures towards its uncertainties by allowing the reader to become privy to his thought processes. In the case of speculative or unverifiable conclusions drawn from relating Dickens' fiction to his life, he occasionally invites his readers to join in these conjectures, giving them a
sense of ownership. In this way, he seeks the reader's support of the central tenet of the biography: that to understand Dickens' work we need only look at the events of his life. The reverse holds true, according to Ackroyd: Dickens' consciousness is apparent when we examine his work. Ackroyd is quite aware, however, that this is a matter of debate in the Poetics of biography.

An unequivocal statement on this issue appears in a review of *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions* (in Salawak ed: 1997), where Derwent May takes issue with Eric Jacobs' comment that he "could better decipher [his subject] in what he had written" (*Times Literary Supplement*, May, 1997: 26). May asserted:

*But is this not entirely to misconceive the interest of fiction and poetry, which may start in the author's soul, but ends up somewhere quite different? They are not there just to help biographers make their way back to his soul again* (*Times Literary Supplement*, May 1997).

An examination of Ackroyd's work reveals his position in this
debate, as he demonstrates the process of a biographer making his way back to an author's soul. By his methodology, he tests whether this process is a part of legitimate biography.

Ackroyd's self-consciousness about the boundaries of fact and fiction in biography is apparent when he shows the process whereby he uses Dickens' work to illuminate the writer's inner life. One instance can be found in his discussion of the autobiographical element in *Great Expectations*. This discursive segment simulates Ackroyd's process of interpreting Dickens' personality, working towards the conclusion that Dickens reflects his own existential problems in the character, Pip. Intent on showing the likelihood of there being a relationship between Dickens' life experience and *Great Expectations*, Ackroyd asks a series of rhetorical questions:
So why is it that Dickens projects himself into so essentially flawed a figure as Pip - might it have been a sudden access of self-knowledge, held away, warded off during these recent difficult years, which could only really be explored in fiction? It is in any event a book of great psychological accuracy and observation, as if Dickens were secretly examining himself as he writes ... is not the convict straying upon the marshes near Cooling another emblem of early fear? ... Old anxiety and sadness returning when love is denied - is that the truth of it? ... Fashioning a self-made "gentleman" in Pip who has no real place in the world and whose own values, created out of self-love, are impossibly frail - what aspect of the author might we see in that? (D: 949-950)

Having offered so much detailed evidence of the events of Dickens' early life, Ackroyd encourages the reader to ponder, with him, the possibility that intimations of Dickens' childhood resonate in his fiction. Thus the reader is made complicit in the identification of the boundary between fact and invention. The part which is necessarily played in decision-making by a removed adjudicator, in the face of limited or contradictory
evidence or in making critical assumptions, is foregrounded. The establishment of a close relationship between Dickens' life and his work, the central premise in Ackroyd's representation of Dickens' inner life, demonstrably informs his interpretation. Thus the exposure of his process of interpretation, in this self-conscious way, is an important aspect of Ackroyd's theorising about the boundaries of fact and fiction in biography.

Byatt takes issue with Ackroyd's examination of the parameters of biography, in his work, *Dickens*. In a review of his biography, she accuses Ackroyd of crossing the boundary which separates fact and fiction. Byatt is scathing in her review of *Dickens* in *The Washington Post Book World*, about what she regards as Ackroyd's "sloppy writing, with too many analogues" (1991: 2). Her indictment of Ackroyd includes the fact that "he has tried to marry the work and the life" but it was inappropriate because "he tried to write a novelist's biography, not a scholar's" (1991: 2). She suggests that Ackroyd's immersion in Dickens' work has resulted in the fictional element of the biography subsuming the factual.

While this is a fair comment, it is also significant that
Ackroyd considers this to be a problem faced by all biographers, and addresses the issue in the metabiographical element in *Dickens*. The segment in which Ackroyd discusses *Great Expectations* signals the problematic issue of the imagination of the biographer who, immersed in the writing of his subject, is in danger of losing objectivity. By example, the passage quoted above shows how Dickens' prose engages the imagination of the biographer, until he finds it difficult to separate the creature of fiction from his creator. As Byatt puts it, in her review of *Dickens*: "Ackroyd is troubled by the idea that his Dickens is his own fiction - but not troubled enough" (1991:2). There is a strong, but questionable assumption inherent in Ackroyd's statement: "So why is it that Dickens projects himself into so essentially flawed a figure as Pip?" (*D*: 949). The reader is made aware of the powerful effect of the fiction on the biographer, which suggests, perhaps, why Ackroyd is troubled enough to examine the problem in his metabiography.

Ultimately, though, the tone of certainty underlying his authorial comments demonstrates Ackroyd's assurance that, when faced with contradictory evidence, the biographer's task is to balance the evidence carefully, and have confidence in his
instincts to make a judgement about which is the most credible in the light of his wider research. By his biographical method, he asserts that this is a necessary part of what we define as biography. It is reminiscent of Thwaite's uncompromising refusal to let theory trouble her assurance about her role as a biographer. As she puts it in her essay, "Starting Again": "I shall allow an experienced instinct to tell me how to deal with the material I find" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 211). It appears that Ackroyd, too, subscribes to the notion of the 'experienced instinct' which comprises, for him, a blend of factual evidence, interpretation and imagination. The imaginative element, illegitimate in itself, nevertheless informs his interpretation of the facts. Ackroyd joins many other theorists, including Woolf, Edel and Clifford, in his belief that imagination assists the biographer's interpretation of factual evidence. Byatt, however, implies in her review of Dickens, that this is a case of a biography being endangered by the novelist's imagination, and that something "has gone wrong" with the biography as a result (1991: 2).

Byatt's novel, Possession, provides another perspective from which to examine issues of definition. In her
metabiography, she shows us how a biography can 'go wrong' to the point where it might be better described as fiction, than as biography. One of the significant concerns of Byatt's work, *Possession*, can also be related to Clifford's approach to definitions of biography. Byatt, too, is interested in the question of objectivity and subjectivity, and the biographer's agency in determining the boundary between biography and prose fiction. Like Ackroyd, she examines the crucial play of imagination and interpretation in the biographical project. She also suggests, through her narrative, that understanding of the past is dependent on one's use of the imagination. But Byatt dramatises her doubts about the interpretative powers of some biographers. She shows how, if the writer's life is not seen as a whole, inaccurate versions of the subject's personality are likely to result. In *Possession*, Byatt also looks at the influence which biographical information can have on readers' interpretation of a work, and the reverse situation: deciphering the subject by means of what he or she has written. Furthermore, she reveals how, in the absence of evidence, the biographer has a propensity to match the interpretation with a personal agenda.
Byatt’s use of the sub-genre of romance is an ironic play with generic form, imagination, and fact and fiction in writing. This has a bearing on the issue of definition, which is one of her metabiographical concerns. She cites Nathaniel Hawthorne in her epigraph to indicate her belief that if "the truth of the human heart" is to be achieved, the creative process must be used in writing (P: Epigraph). When Roland and Maud are struggling to understand the mystery of the love between Ash and LaMotte, an understanding which is central to any real knowledge of their lives and personalities, they agree that it takes "a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them" (P: 267). Roland and Maud are paralysed emotionally by the cynicism of their generation which had taught them that love is "a suspect ideological construct" (P: 267). Yet when their imagination is stirred by the letters of Ash and LaMotte, they too feel the "kick galvanic" (P: 147), the passion which helps them to understand the experience of the Victorian couple.

But Byatt also uses an extract from "Mr Sludge, 'the medium'", in her epigraph, to draw attention to the boundary which must be drawn between fact and fiction. Byatt seems to be suggesting that, while generic boundaries can be crossed, and
imagination employed in order to gain insight into other worlds, ultimately the biographer should be anchored by fact. 'Mr Sludge' signals the dangers in biography writing of manipulating facts to suit the preferred version of the life. In the epigraphs of Possession, Byatt yokes Hawthorne and Browning together to make a preliminary statement of what is required of any writer, poet, novelist, biographer or historian. They must mediate between sense and spirit, fact and imagination, material existence and the visionary power of art. One of the themes of her romance, which can be related equally to biography and fiction, is concerned with the balance of realism and the spiritual; she shows how the real world might be seen better through the thin bubble of the imagination. But the writer must be wary of building a "solid fabric out of air" (P: Epigraph) which reductive interpretations tend to do.

Byatt draws the line between imagination and, as Mr Sludge sees them, the "helpful lies" of subjective interpretation which suits a particular argument (P: Epigraph). In a sense, Byatt's representation of this tendency might almost be a direct answer to Ackroyd's confident interpretations of his subject's life. She draws a satirical portrait of Leonora Stern, a fictional
American feminist critic with an axe to grind. Stern's approach to the writings of Christabel LaMotte signals Byatt's view of what happens when biased interpretation takes the place of hard factual evidence. Stern's reductive approach to LaMotte's work is the effect of her assumptions about LaMotte's Boston marriage to Blanche Glover. Stern's belief that LaMotte was a lesbian has coloured her interpretation of LaMotte's poetry. According to Ann Hulbert's article, "The Great Ventriloquist" (in Hosmer ed. 1993),

Byatt's aim is to show that Maud and Roland are guided to their discovery by a much more imaginative sense of what words can mean than either of the Americans begins to grasp (1993: 58).

Byatt contrasts Stern's digression about autoeroticism, with the understandings of the young scholars who are "onto the truth" (in Hosmer ed. 1993: 58). In Stern's interpretation, the landscapes in LaMotte's epic poem, "The Fairy Melusine", are related to erotic terrain, privileging female sexuality. Stern writes:
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The fountain does not 'spring' but 'bubbles and seeps' up into the 'still and secret' pool, with its 'low mossy stone' surrounded by 'peaks and freshenings' of 'running and closing' waters (P: 245).

Stern borrows Cixous' écriture féminine to describe the poem, and believes it relates to "female auto-erotic fantasies of generation without copulation" (P : 245). In fact, the poem proves to be highly allusive to geographical locations encountered during Ash and LaMotte's all-consuming, heterosexual affair in Yorkshire. Stern's misjudgement is a result of projection of her own sexuality onto that of LaMotte. Hulbert claims the young scholars' "sympathetic comprehension of the poets is the opposite of sophistication" (in Hosmer ed. 1993: 58), and is the result of a more natural use of the imagination.

Byatt parts company with Ackroyd, then, on the issue of using the author's work to inform the subject's characterisation. Possession explicates the dangers of over-reliance on the relationship between the author and the work. Her fiction shows her opinion that assumptions about an author
based on his work have the potential to corrupt the authenticity of the biography, to the point where it is defined out of the genre. One of the points which emerges in her work is that interpretation of literature, being subject to theoretical 'fashion', is an unreliable method of deducing the characteristics of its writer. Similarly, an uncomplicated reading of the work in terms of the life is problematic, according to Byatt's text. Thus, she is wary about Ackroyd's position that the relationship between the writer's work and his or her life is an informing element of biography. Byatt satirises the pragmatism of different theoretical schools, such as Leonora Stern's hard-line feminism, which interpret literature according to their own agendas, and she shows how knowledge of the writer might sometimes point to very different meanings.

Fergus Wolff, whose name does little to disguise his predatory sexual and professional activities, is a vehicle by which Byatt further unsettles the notion of interpretation in literary biography. Wolff's academic success is, to a large degree, assisted by his ability to adjust to current theoretical fashion. At a women's conference on "Gender and the
Autonomous Text", Wolff gave "an authoritative paper on 'The Potent Castrato: the phallogocentric structuration of Balzac's hermaphrodite hero/ines." Wolff covered all bases: "The drift of his argument appeared to be feminist. The thrust of its presentation was somehow mocking and subversive" (P : 57).

Byatt characterises Wolff as the type of quick-footed academic who allows current theoretical thinking to dictate his interpretations of literature. This has obvious implications for biography, since working backwards from the text might result in misconceptions about the author's real nature, which, in turn, throw doubt upon the legitimacy of the biography written about him or her.

When asked by Roland what, if anything, he knows about the Victorian poet, LaMotte, Wolff responds with a number of interpretations of LaMotte's epic poem, "The Fairy Melusine". Wolff explains: "there are all sorts of symbolic and mythological and psychological interpretations" (P : 33). According to Wolff, Virginia Woolf thought that it reflected the androgyny of the creative mind, but later feminist readings of "The Fairy Melusine" claim that it expresses women's impotent desire. He observes that the New Feminists "adduced it as an
image of the essential androgeny of the creative mind" (P:34). But they "see Melusina in her bath as a symbol of self-sufficient female sexuality needing no poor males" (P:34). Wolff finds nothing unusual about the disparity between these interpretations, but, more importantly, none of the interpretations, it is later proved, provides an answer to Roland's question. All of them lead to misconceptions about LaMotte's nature and lifestyle. Roland's later revelation of Christabel LaMotte's passionate relationship with Randolph Ash radically changes the previous conceptions of her sexuality and her personality.

The exposure of the Ash/LaMotte affair also changes the face of Ash's life. The "peaceable, so unruffled a private existence", which Roland imagined Ash's life to be, will never look the same again. Cropper, projecting his own preoccupation with death, imagined Ash's visit to Yorkshire to study marine organisms to be motivated by anxiety about his own mortality:
This phenomenon fascinated him because it seemed to him to indicate a continuity and interdependence of all life, which might perhaps assist in modifying or doing away with the notion of individual death (to which) ... he and his contemporaries were all hideously subject (P:249).

Cropper's biography of Ash totalises all Ash's contemporaries when he refers to loss of religious faith. La Motte is a notable exception which disproves this rule. Cropper's interpretation is also misjudged with regard to Ash's supposed 'mid-life crisis' of approaching mortality. Ash's primary interest in the Yorkshire expedition was in LaMotte, and a passion which was very much self-affirming and full of hope.

Although, in her work, Byatt questions the accuracy of adducing the nature of an author in terms of his or her work, she does not deny that it can illuminate aspects of the way the author thought. But she points to the gap between a full knowledge of an author's life and the 'dark areas' which remain undisclosed. This is the critical area in interpretation, according to Byatt. Maud and Roland's successful quest demonstrates the other side of the debate. Biographical
information can be invaluable when applied as an interpretative tool by scholars who are not merely seeking academic credibility, but have a sincere affinity with the authors and their literature. When these conditions apply, according to Byatt's narrative, the author's life can be used as a legitimate interpretative device and, then, is an important part of the equation of literary biography.

As Maud and Roland follow the Victorian couple in Yorkshire, and then the divergent path of LaMotte to Europe, the reader is able to observe the process of gathering the material for a more valid biography than the existing one, written by Cropper. The facts which are discovered will genuinely illuminate the poetry of both authors. This story will accommodate the intersection of LaMotte's life with that of Ash, and the delicate thread of imagination, the conduit between the novel's past and present, replaces the Americans' subjective interpretations.

Along with her interest in the inter-relationship between the events of the author's life and his or her work, Byatt's covert theory is also concerned with one of the central issues of biography: the place of subjective interpretation in life-
writing. This issue emerges in the process of deconstructing Cropper's biography of Ash while, at the same time, we follow the process by which material for another is gathered.

Byatt's treatment of the biographer's identification with his subject, when read with Ackroyd's self-consciously mimetic biography, provides an interesting arena for examination which bears on issues of definition. The issue is one which is at the forefront of current theoretical debate. Catherine Peters, in "Secondary Lives: Biography in Context" (in Batchelor ed. 1995), comments on the subject of the identification of the biographer with his or her subject. Her discussion of the "ventriloquist biography ... (which) seeks to annihilate the distance between self and subject by taking on a subject's own voice" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 45), is pertinent to an examination of Possession and Dickens, both of whom are concerned with the degree of identification allowed a biographer, before the work crosses the boundary between biography and autobiography. Peters claims that
Identification is no longer seen as a danger, but as a necessary but temporary stage in the biographer's relationship with his or her subject. Now it is deliberately cultivated to the extent where the two voices are merged (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 45).

Ackroyd's experiment with a mimetic biography of Dickens takes identification with Dickens to the point where the two voices are at times merged but, I would argue, the experiment is deliberately cultivated. Byatt's biographer is not characterised as a man of awareness or control, and is the vehicle whereby she warns of the dangers of an over-intrusive biographer, who is totally self-absorbed, and unable to distance himself enough to make an objective assessment of his subject.

Byatt shows us that, to qualify as biography, the text must also take into account the nature and competence of the biographer. In Possession the ability of the biographer to transmit a true picture of the subject's life is considered. The reader is encouraged to question the nature of the biographer. Is he or she a person of integrity? Is the biographer emotionally and psychologically whole? Has the biographer the capacity to understand a subject whose abilities might well
surpass his or hers? Is the biographer so egocentric that the world and the people in it are only seen in relation to himself or herself?

Byatt gives Cropper, and part of his biography of Ash, as a negative example of the biographical project. In effect, she shows us what biography ought not to be. It is a satiric portrait of a misogynistic, even misanthropic, and sexually dysfunctional man. His inadequacy is explained, in part, by his oedipal attachment to his mother. Cropper's narrow view of the world is totally incompatible with that of his subject, the fictional poet, Randolph Henry Ash, whose "elastic mind" (P: 2) and passionate nature are beyond his biographer's scope. The biographer's inadequacy is outlined by the omniscient narrator in the context of his biographical method of documenting every item of Ash's life that he could find. He
perhaps felt his own identity at times, at the very best times, as insubstantial, leached into this matter-of-writing, stuff-of-record .... He tended his body, the outward man, with a fastidiousness that he would have bestowed on the inner man too, if he had known who he was, if he did not feel the whole thing to be thickly veiled (P:99).

Cropper's self-absorption expresses itself in his attempts to write an autobiography, but it lapses into a random collection of "banal childhood memories, or a mere scholarly cataloguing of his subsequent relations with Randolph Henry Ash" (P: 105). These 'relations' are, in fact, simply a collection of memorabilia of the dead poet, the central item of which is a letter from Ash. Cropper's "Cabinet of Treasures" (P: 103), privileging relics of Ash, reveals that he has no separate existence of his own; he has assembled his own personality around relics of Ash. He is characterised as a man who is no more than an obsessive collector, driven to the ghoulish extreme of grave robbery in his pursuit of a vicarious identity. Cropper's 'autobiography' stops with the letter from Ash to his great-grandmother which, ironically, requests that she send no more writings to him.
Having shown that, because he is damaged psychologically, Cropper is unable to write an autobiography, Byatt then gives us a taste of his biography, *The Great Ventriloquist*. The irony of the title is that it is difficult to determine just who Cropper styles as 'the great ventriloquist', Ash or himself. When we read Cropper's biography we become aware, at least in retrospect, that Cropper is not an adequate medium to transmit either the personality of Ash or the scope of his ideas. When, in the narrative, Byatt describes Cropper's preoccupation with pornographic photographs, the implication is that Cropper is unable to understand sexuality, except in his own perverted terms. We see that Cropper is simply not up to the task of writing the biography of a man of Ash's stature and nature. What he has produced is essentially refracted through the narrow conduit of his own twisted vision of the world. It tells the reader more about Cropper than about Ash. Thus, the question of the boundary between biography and autobiography is raised.

Byatt uses a cinematic metaphor to present Cropper as a negative example, a biographer whose work is really
autobiography, because it is more about himself than about his subject. In the course of a lecture about biography, Cropper projects slides of various items of his Ash memorabilia, but casts his own shadow over the images:

From time to time, as if by accident, the animated shadow of Cropper’s aquiline head would be thrown, as if in silhouette, across these luminous objects ... he would laugh, apologise, and say half-seriously, carefully scripted, there you see the biographer, a component of the picture, a moving shadow, not to be forgotten among the things he works with. (P: 385)

The reverse is, in fact, the truth; it is the personality of Ash which has been forgotten in the extreme egocentricity of Cropper’s vision of his subject and his world. According to Byatt, biography has a dubious status when the biographer superimposes his own subjectivity on that of his subject. Byatt thus widens the definition of biography to include the factor of the biographer as a crucial ingredient in determining the nature of literary biography, problematising the biographer who is visible to the point of overshadowing his or her subject.
The relationship between the biographer and his subject is one in which Ackroyd has an interest, but the issue is presented discursively, and by example, rather than in the figurative manner employed by Byatt. In practice, Ackroyd inclines towards the benefits of identification with his subject, Dickens, which Catherine Peters claims is a current trend of biographers. In "Secondary Lives: Biography in Context", Peters makes the point that "the ventriloquist biography" is a device whereby the biographer seeks to close the distance between self and subject (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 45). But in addition to the experimental mimetic model which his biography provides, Ackroyd addresses this issue separately, in the 'interview' segment, admitting some ambivalence about projecting his own subjectivity onto his biographical subject in Dickens:

all I wanted to do was understand him ...in that sense he was like a character in a novel I might write .... At the time of the actual writing, I certainly did. Immediately after the book was finished, I thought I did. Now I'm not so sure (D : 945-946).

In retrospect, Ackroyd apparently shares some of Byatt's
concerns that over-identification with one's biographical subject might result in dubious accuracy of characterisation.

In the documentary film based on his biography, Ackroyd went further on the matter of identification with a biographical subject. He admitted: "I was becoming not like Dickens but I was becoming much more affected by him than I'd realised at first" (1992). He transmits a sense of becoming lost in his subject to the point where the distinction between them was blurred. Perhaps his comments could be interpreted as a realisation which had grown as he had become more distanced from his subject: he might have imposed a pattern on Dickens' life which was cut from his own shape. In the documentary film based on Dickens, there is a filmic device used which has a curious synchronicity with the image used by Byatt, in Possession. When Ackroyd's image is superimposed filmically on Dickens' world, it is reminiscent of Cropper's slide show in which Cropper casts his shadow over Ash's projected image. Thus Byatt and Ackroyd both demonstrate an awareness that, to a certain degree, the subject's personality mirrors the biographer's. When this occurs to the point that biography becomes autobiography, the question of definition is raised.
The comment on the issue made by Glendinning in an interview draws the attitudes of Byatt and Ackroyd together. She warns that

there are acts of projection, or identification, which are both useful and dangerous. I think you have to be aware, if you identify, that you are not quietly writing about yourself (Appendix: 29).

The metabiographical elements in the works of Byatt and Ackroyd echo Glendinning's theory that over-identification results in a work that might be better defined as autobiography.

The biographical status of Dickens is thrown into relief by reading it, with Possession, as metabiography. The conjunction of the texts shows that there is more to a definition of literary biography than Edel's simple statement, cited at the beginning of this chapter: "The writings of the lives of men and women who were themselves writers" (1957: 2). Possession encourages us to question whether Dickens is, in fact, a biography. We wonder whether Ackroyd's experiments with literary biography result in a corrupted form, and in so doing, formulate our own theories about the parameters of biography.
We observe Ackroyd's juxtaposition of the factual and the fictional segments in *Dickens* with the purpose of privileging his use of imagination and, in addition, we are able to examine the effects of his deliberately cultivated identification with his subject. According to Byatt, in her review of *Dickens* in *The Washington Post Book World*, these devices have resulted in a hybrid text which is neither one thing nor the other (1991). *Possession* examines the issues fictionally, dramatising the imaginative power of Byatt's protagonists, but giving warning, by means of Cropper, of the negative effect of self-interest and an imbalance of imagination and verifiable fact in biography.

The conjunction of *Possession* and *Dickens* and other writings in the field of biography, encourage us to question Ackroyd's authoritative position in the representation of his subject. Byatt's text can be set against Ackroyd's model of the archetypal Victorian biography about the life of a celebrated writer, established firmly in the traditional male-authored canon. *Possession* dramatises the distorted, or partial truths of the type of biography which marginalises or excludes the lives of women, or the obscure.
Ackroyd's model asserts the interpretative function of the biographer, but Byatt's satire makes us wary of the authority he asserts in this regard, causing us to look closely at his methods. Byatt draws attention to the biographer's disposition to interpret events in the subject's life according to a predetermined scheme. Her novel gives a salutary warning about the directions in which biography is going, and the effect is that readers tend to examine Ackroyd's experiment with biography with greater interest.

The examination of biography by means of *Dickens* and *Possession* and associated literature about biography provides a better understanding of the parameters of biography. The contribution of Ackroyd and Byatt to a definition of literary biography shows that biography is a *version* of the life of a subject, connected in some way to the literary contract, whereby the writer mediates between the verifiable sources and the reader, reconstructing these sources with varying degrees of selectivity and interpretative licence. Together, the two metabiographies assist in the formulation of a working definition of biography. Questions raised about the biographer's authority to mediate between the sources and reader, and the
truth-value of the resultant version of a life, is the subject of
Chapter 2.
Chapter two

Truth and authority in biography

The vexed question of 'truth' is a primary preoccupation within the Poetics of biography and, as well as being pertinent to definition, addressed in the previous chapter, it underlies all the issues associated with biography. As metabiographies, both *Possession* and *Dickens* examine the notion of truth in biography, questioning the assumption that it is appropriate to use such a finite term, even though biography purports to transmit factual material to its audience. Associated with the problems of truth-value of biography, and also subject to the scrutiny of the two works, is the implied claim of biographers that they are in a position of authority with regard to conveying the truth about their subject, and that their stance is objective. Current theoretical debate destabilises both of these assumptions, and Byatt and Ackroyd reflect the theoretical climate in their works. This chapter draws on the contributions made by *Possession* and *Dickens* to the debate about truth and authority found in much of the literature about biography, and uses the different perspectives of the two works to help clarify
some of these issues. Byatt and Ackroyd focus on the notion of alternative truths, and examine the compatibility of truth and imagination, as well as the power of metaphor to convey truth in biography. The question of interpretation by the biographer, and the problematics of reading the subject's life in terms of his or her work are considered in both works. Also within the scope of these works lies the issue of the biographer's authority to use psychoanalytical methods to provide insights into literary figures.

The issue of the biographer's position of authority is of interest to Byatt and Ackroyd, both of whom are influenced by a troubled climate of opinion about a reading of the past. In *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, Nadel claims that, in twentieth-century biography, "there is a general move to self-conscious fictions and narrators" (1984: 185). Nadel states:
Our own age, reacting against the belief that the collection of data and empirical record could convey the life of a subject and sceptical of the chronological pattern of a life, has become more self-consciously aware of method. Although the technical convention of omniscience survives in biography, the concept of a shared value system - of there being a single self for the subject - does not (1984: 186).

Nadel asserts that biographers now recognise the impossibility of achieving the unified self, and the implications that this has for biography. Yet, in opposition to this understanding, lie the public's expectations. In "Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer", Worthen also points to this conundrum, claiming that, while it is growing increasingly difficult to publish biographies that "claim less than omniscience", biography shares with history the problems of "inescapable ignorance: what I call necessary ignorance" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 227). He tells us that
We must remind ourselves that the biographer is ignorant: not just accidentally ignorant, but ignorant by the very nature of the biographer's trade ... [yet] pressured by his or her publisher not to keep putting in sentences describing his or her ignorance (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 241).

Beset by conflicting messages like these, Ackroyd and Byatt examine the authority of the biographer to transmit truth to the reader, but reach different conclusions. Byatt narrativises many of the slips between the cup of biographical facts and the lip of the biographer, and leaves the question of authority unsettled in her postmodernist fiction. Although beset with problems of authority, Ackroyd's position contrasts with Byatt's because, ultimately, he decides that "the uncertainty principle" must give way to the "certainty and clarity ... or the whole enterprise starts to collapse" (D: 942). He does not inspire much confidence, though, when he admits that the most important skill of the biographer is "to cover up your own inadequacies" (D: 946). He discusses the problem, but enacts a biography of authority. Despite an awareness, and address of the issues of authority in his biography, Ackroyd complies with the assumption that an authoritative biographer is a generic prerequisite.
The most powerful claim for biography is simply this: that while the subject of fiction lives fictionally, the subject of biography lived in fact. It follows that interrogation of a fact/truth symbiosis lies at the heart of an investigation of biography. It begins with attempts to define truth, and even to challenge whether it is possible to ascertain truth. The doubtful status of the word is emphasised by the current theoretical practice of enclosing it in quotation marks. Is it possible to know the truth? Can an individual transmit experience accurately to another? Can another's experience be understood? As individuals, is not our own truth subject to erasures, distortions, rationalisations, or embellishments? How much is our understanding of other times, and even of the world we inhabit, distorted to fit the over-riding narratives of our culture within which we organise our values and our way of seeing events? How, then, can a biographer convey the truth about another life, given the effect of the partial truths of multiple intermediaries?

The notion of alternative truths, especially when they form a hierarchy, further destabilises the signification of the term
'truth'. In Biography, Shelston comments on the generic hierarchy debate, citing Henry James as a proponent of the "higher truth" of fiction compared with the "truth of fact" of biography (1977: 4). James' concept of a 'higher truth', if there is such a thing, is related to the belief that fiction has the potential to illuminate certain beliefs in a way that biography, tied to facts and chronology, cannot do. This is a nebulous concept, but one that underlies arguments about the relative status of fiction and biography. Byatt and Ackroyd both play with this concept in their works. Byatt comes closest to James' preference for fiction, while Ackroyd appropriates liberating fictional devices to explore the truth claims of biography and fiction.

These concerns of Byatt and Ackroyd are a development of ideas raised by Virginia Woolf in two essays on biography. In "The Art of Biography", Virginia Woolf states that biographers can give us "creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders", leaving us with "some figure who lives on in the depths of the mind" (Woolf, L. ed. 1953: 228). In "The New Biography", she acknowledges tensions between what she deems to be biography's necessary use of the imagination and
regard for truth. She perceives truth to be a slippery concept, referring to "the truth of real life and the truth of fiction" (Woolf, L. ed.1953: 234). She concludes that biographers are urged to combine "the incompatible" (Woolf, L. ed. 1953: 234). Despite her continuing preoccupation with biography, Woolf’s ambivalence about the form resulted in her moving in the direction of imaginative life-writing that drew on biographical material. Orlando (1928) is an example of how she elides the opposition of the 'granite' of truth and the 'rainbow' of imagination in biography by writing a novel drawing on the facts of Vita Sackville-West's life.

As Edel states in Literary Biography, Orlando is a "scarcely concealed biographical sketch, genealogy and all, of Vita Sackville-West (1957: 93). It comes complete with dedication to Vita Sackville-West, and the first edition included photographs of her. There are allusions to her poetry and a 'bibliography'. It is obvious, though, that a book whose subject lives for several centuries can hardly be taken to be factual. Woolf's Orlando is recognisable only as typifying Vita Sackville-West. Her aim is to give the reader the 'truth of fiction', the evasive truth of metaphor.
Another writer of biography and fiction, Victoria Glendinning, reveals a similar interest in the claims of truth in biography. There is explicit comment made about biography's doubtful claims to truth in Glendinning's genuine biography of Vita Sackville-West; *Vita*, (1984). In its opening lines is a disclaimer that it is Vita Sackville-West's 'story'. Glendinning asserts that "one of the 'lies' of all biography is in that fact. Another is that any story can ever be the whole story" (1984: xvii). Although Glendinning admits her biography is "less than comprehensive" (xvii), her epigraph nevertheless explains the lure of biography: "Still, within our limitations it is necessary to arrive at some conclusions, certain facts do emerge" (1984: xi). Glendinning's 'certain facts' also convey truth about Vita Sackville-West, although it appears in a different form from that presented in Woolf's *Orlando*.

The central organising forces of Ackroyd's work throw some light on the problematic notion of truth in biography. Ackroyd explores the minefield which is the claim of truth in biography by testing the compatibility of truth of fact and truth of fiction. He confronts the central problem of the biographer, that truth and authority are inextricably connected, by
foregrounding the signification of the term 'truth'. His biography promises to be definite and comprehensive, since it is an impressively weighty addition to the procession of biographies already written about Dickens. By writing yet another biography about Dickens, Ackroyd implies that he is offering a new perspective built on past biographical foundations. He destabilises this position of authority, however, by examining the meaning of truth and the underlying truth-value of biography, discussing it in authorial asides about his own writing, and also in relation to his subject's writing and understanding of truth. Moreover, by juxtaposing fictional and 'factual' segments in the biography, he makes a point about the different faces of truth. Truth, then, is a central preoccupation of the work.

The most striking aspect of metabiography is its discursive element, and this is true of Dickens in its examination of truth. Simultaneously, Ackroyd presents us with an apparently seamless web of cause and effect, and calls attention to his manipulation of facts. He gives us an orderly narrative within which, in an 'interview' segment interpolated in the book, he admits he "made a point of hustling together events and images
in order to effect a smooth transition. In other words, I cheated", he confesses (D: 943). In an ingenious sleight of hand, Ackroyd pre-empted scholarly theoretical discussion about his biographical opportunism, even as he enacts it in his biography.

A complication with regard to truth in biography, which Ackroyd addresses in his critique of biography, is the biographer's balance between truth and invention. He joins in the dialogue, in which current theorists of biography and biographers are engaged, concerning this issue. The metaphysical problem of determining a finite 'truth' is experienced by biographers on an everyday basis, when they are faced by sources, often second hand, which must be interrogated for their reliability. Richard Holmes elaborates on the fictive element of biographical sources in "Biography: Inventing the Truth". He shows how biographies are based on sources which are unreliable: "Memory itself is fallible; memoirs are inevitably biased; letters are always slanted towards their recipients; even private diaries and intimate journals have to be recognized as literary forms of self-invention rather than an 'ultimate' truth of private fact or feeling" (in Batchelor ed. 1995:17). The biographer works, at second remove, with
materials which already have an element of invention, and superimposes an invented element to some degree. The 'truth' thus becomes rather remote in biography.

In "The Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer", Worthen claims that

*many biographies allow problems of documentary evidence to remain in the biography, only to display the skill of the biographer in solving them before your very eyes* (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 240).

What Worthen claims about the conjuring tricks of biographers in general, with regard to the use of documentary evidence, might well be applied to Ackroyd's use of material, and to his way of dealing with the problem of gaps, ambiguities and contradictions in his sources.

Aware of the problematics of biographical authority, Ackroyd deals self-consciously, in his metabiography, with the most pronounced area of difficulty: the relationship between the personality that the subject presents, and his or her inner
consciousness. Ackroyd imposes a pattern on the facts at his disposal to transmit the essential character of his biographical subject. This is not unusual in biography, as Worthen explains in "The Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 227-242), but what is unusual is Ackroyd's foregrounding of this process. He inserts discursive passages which characteristically pay lip-service to uncertainties. He prefaces one anecdote for which he has no verifiable facts: "We are left, then, with the enduring and perhaps unanswerable question ...." (D: 965). At times of uncertainty, Ackroyd tends to pose questions for the reader. He asks:

And what also of the impetuosity and self-destructiveness which ...seem to have been a feature of his parents' life in those earliest years? What about the insouciance, almost the coldness, which is also present? And how is it ...that they formed the greatest novelist ever to have written in the English language? What power made that? (D: 14).

Leaving aside the assumption of Dickens' ascendancy which is not shared by all readers, he invites his readers to make judgements, thus appearing to make them complicit in the
selection process, to develop, in effect, their own hypotheses. He lays bare the problem of authority, but the implication is that, as an experienced practitioner, he can provide the answers.

Periodically, Ackroyd allows that it is only an illusion that biography can tell the whole story of a life, even though the size of his volume on Dickens suggests the attempt to do so. He comments on the way origins cannot be recalled, and that early childhood "can only be re-experienced in the act of remembering; in the act, therefore, of interpretation and explanation" (D: 15). He acknowledges, then, the unreliability of memory and the fact that we have different 'truths' in our memories.

Ackroyd finds a way around the problems of doubtful source material, though, by recourse to Dickens' fiction. In this way, he examines the relationship between a writer's work and life, and the accuracy of a biography which draws on this relationship. Although he does not subscribe to the notion of a single, finite truth, Ackroyd feels it is the responsibility of the biographer to present something which gives this impression.
So, paradoxically, given his concessions to the problematic issue of truth in biography, the tone of Ackroyd's text is assertive. His claims of real knowledge rest not only on very thorough research and biographical experience, but also on relating Dickens' fiction to events of his life. In the 'interview' segment in the biography, he refers to the "'life and work' divide" and explains that he wanted to "discover a new way of describing the novels themselves" (D: 943). In Dickens, Ackroyd tests orthodox biography with regard to the relationship between the art and the writer. In the confessional interview segment, however, he concedes that "sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't" (D: 942), and admits to the likelihood that he has "imposed a pattern where no pattern really exists" (D: 943). He uses a controversial device, then addresses it separately in his metabiography.

Ackroyd is authoritative in his assumptions about Dickens, based on his fiction. He makes confident statements about Dickens' motivations and inner consciousness based on his wide knowledge of Dickens' literature, and on the psychological methods which he uses to forge the links between the disparate incidents of Dickens' life. Ackroyd's judgements, then, are
largely dependent on two methods of biography which many theorists consider to be unreliable. He shows a readiness to depend on synthesis of causal psychoanalytic interpretation of Dickens' character and behaviour with evidence gleaned from reading his literature.

There is considerable theoretical debate by other biographers about the effectiveness of this approach. In *Telling Women's Lives*, Wagner-Martin claims that scholars are not trained to uncover deep psychological structures: "A biography course, a class in historical research, even psychology courses will leave the writer with only terminology, nothing close to accurate insight" (1994: 80). According to Wagner-Martin, amateur psychology has no place in biography.

In *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations*, Richard Ellmann, makes an important point, with regard to psychoanalysis, that later experiences often impinge on earlier, apparently significant situations, and warns of the dangers of reducing all achievement "to a web of causation until we cannot see the Ego for the Id" (1973: 4). His position, too, is that, intriguing though psychoanalytic methods might be, they are
difficult to convert for lay purposes

Victoria Glendinning claims to distrust amateur psychology, and does not attempt it in her life of Vita Sackville-West, even though there is such apparently fertile ground in the records of Vita's upbringing and strange animal dreams, and in her novels. In interview, though, while dismissing Freud as being "neither original nor, in most cases right nor helpful", Glendinning owned to a strong interest in certain aspects of psychology: "motivation and how the past activates on the present, and how old relationships overshadow new ones" (Appendix 1: 8). An interest in the subject's formative life experiences and relationships, and the use of the psychoanalytical method in connection with the subject's writing, are quite separate issues, according to Glendinning.

In his biography of Edgar Allen Poe, The Tell-Tale Heart (1978), Julian Symons makes some useful points about the problems inherent in the application of psychoanalysis to literature. He considers that "the difference in effectiveness between the application of psychoanalytical ideas to the life and to the work seems to me very great " (1978: 230). He
argues that it is inadequate to consider the conscious intentions of a writer in terms of unconscious desires and motives. Moreover, he cites "the witty remark of one analyst: 'The aeroplane is a sex-symbol; it can also be used to fly from Munich to Vienna" (1978: 228). Although Symons accepts that accounts of Poe's life indicate that he is a perfect case for a psychological study, he draws the line at the arbitrary truths of psychoanalysis being applied to Poe's work.

Examining the actual events of a subject's life and relating them to his or her personality might be regarded as sound biographical practice, but it is a quantum leap to make similar assumptions from material drawn from the subject's literature. However, opinions are sharply divided on this issue. The value of deriving evidence about a subject's psychology from his or her work is supported by Arthur Rampersand. In *Life into Art: Conversations with Seven Contemporary Biographers*, Rampersand replies to Gail Porter Mandell's question, of whether a writer's work reveals something of the life, with a strong affirmative. He claims: "almost any work by a serious artist, if it's approached carefully, contains evidence of the psychological state and psychological history too, of the
Richard Ellmann is more cautious, when he writes, in *Golden Codgers*:

> The living originals of fictional characters are elusive because they have been obliged by the writer to answer purposes not their own. It is as if they were evicted from a universe of free will into a deterministic one (1973: 16).

Ellmann allows, though, that there is critical purpose in observing 'the basic movements of the mind' of the writer in his creation of characters in the fictional universe, and for that reason, claims that such observation has biographical consequence.

Ackroyd's biography, *Dickens*, shows that he shares Rampersand's view that the work of a writer reveals the truth of his or her psychology. Ackroyd refers to the birth of a sibling of Dickens, when he was just two years old, who died six months later of "water on the brain" (*D*: 19). Ackroyd quotes Dickens "in another context" (my italics), describing
himself as "an alien from my mother's heart", and suggests that he might have felt this way because of "the emergence of another male child" \((D: 18)\). He extrapolates from these sources an idea that the guilt which he claims pervaded Dickens' life could be traced back to this event. The child's death, according to this logic, was interpreted by Dickens as a wish-fulfilment, and he expressed his guilty feelings in his fiction. Although Ackroyd emphasises that this interpretation of Dickens "\textit{might have been}", he concludes:

\begin{quote}
when the adulthood of Dickens is considered, with all its evidence that Dickens did indeed suffer from an insidious pressure of irrational guilt, and when all the images of dead infants are picked out of his fiction, it is hard to believe that this six-month episode ... did not have some permanent effect upon him \((D: 19)\).
\end{quote}

A more detached assessment of these particular fictional references might well consider that they reflect the high infant mortality rate of industrial and urban Victorian England. A generic feature of Victorian fiction, moreover, is the pathos of sentimental death-bed scenes and child death. This is perhaps a more plausible explanation of Dickens' propensity to write
about infant death. As readers, we must have reservations, as this instance exemplifies, about drawing conclusions about a writer's inner consciousness by extrapolating from his or her writing.

One of the major justifications for writing about the life of a literary figure has traditionally been that it illuminates her or his literature. But Ackroyd expects the reverse to hold true. He claims that, "once we start looking for images of Dickens and of those closest to him, in the biographical equivalent of spirit-rapping, we see their shapes everywhere" (D: 742). In his reading of Dickens' works, he finds Dickens recreating himself in Stephen Blackpool's loveless marriage, Dickens' father in Gradgrind, Dickens in Gradgrind's son, Tom, or perhaps Dickens' own son. These are examples of connections which Ackroyd draws between the characters in just one novel, (Hard Times ), and the real world of Dickens.

No-one could deny that psychoanalysis and the exploration of the unconscious have provided a new tool for the biographer to use, but there are dangers in this approach. Everything we know about the creative process must tell us that the
experience of a writer, although informing his or her writing, is shaped and often distorted to fit the artistic design. One would expect a biographer, like Ackroyd, who confesses to a tendency to fit biographical material to an arbitrary design, to be wary of relying too heavily on Dickens' literature. How can a biographer hope to work back from the literature to make an accurate reconstruction of the writer's experience when s/he knows the writing is a literary construct? Which aspects of the experience might be exaggerated? With what certainty can s/he separate the invented from the recounted experience? Even autobiography has a selective and an invented element. Many fictional writers, it might be argued, would be delighted to embrace the notion that 'the author is dead', if not in the literal sense, if they thought that everything they wrote would be interpreted as revelatory of their real lives.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the way in which Dickens was apt to fictionalise real events in order to project a particular image of himself to the public. There is also a certain self-consciousness about specific passages of Dickens' fiction which suggests he anticipated being identified with his characters. In Great Expectations and especially David Copperfield, in which
there is an autobiographical element, there is a sense of Dickens dramatising events and characters to transmit an image of himself to his public. Such self-invention is not the same as Ackroyd’s psychological connections which rely on deep structures in the fiction to reveal Dickens’ inner consciousness.

To return to Dickens' alleged sense of guilt, then, it seems unlikely that accurate knowledge can be assumed about its causes. Judging from the evidence that Ackroyd gives us about Dickens' behaviour to many of those closest to him, there are enough wide-ranging reasons for guilt to be found in his adult life, without returning to his infant motivations. Besides, there are such enormous contradictions to be found between Dickens' fictional morality, and his private life, that it seems practical to abandon the attempt to reconcile them. Finally, it is straining a point to suggest that even the most egocentric and precocious of two-year-old children would assume responsibility for the death of a younger sibling which lasted throughout his whole life. But to think this way, one must resist the strong invitation to readers, implicit in Ackroyd's biography, to include him among "those who profess to understand the nature of human consciousness" (D: 18).
Anthony Storr, in "Psychiatry and Literary Biography" (in Batchelor ed. 1995), goes some way towards reconciling the debate about the authority of biographers to use psychoanalytical methods. He concedes that, while clinical psychiatry has provided excellent biographical insights into literary figures, psychoanalytic interpretation has proved unreliable in literary biography. He cites examples of errors made by Freud himself. He advises literary biographers to "reject psychoanalytic interpretations of character based upon suppositions about infantile experience and misperception which cannot be authenticated (in Batchelor ed.1995: 86). Notwithstanding the fact that terms and concepts originally derived from psychoanalysis have become useful currency, Storr asserts that the psychoanalytic method is reductive and overly simplistic when applied to the complex, and absented, figures of literature. He cites Freud's reservations about making assumptions of a subject's motives and the essence of his mind, when removed from the possibility of "years of the closest investigation" (in Batchelor ed.1995: 73). In fact, current psychological thinking has largely discredited much of Freud's psychoanalytic theory per se.
Storr, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, and the Royal College of Psychiatrists, as well as a Fellow of the Royal College of Literature, is eminently qualified to comment on the legitimacy, in biography, of descriptive, clinical psychiatry. He distinguishes this from the detailed psychoanalytic construction of the infancy of a literary figure. Of particular relevance to this discussion are his comments on Dickens, which are in strong contrast to the assessment, made by Ackroyd, of the reasons for Dickens' manic-depressive disorder.

Ackroyd attributes Dickens' episodes of depression and guilt, his sexuality, his obsessive behaviour, and indeed all aspects of his personality, to his childhood treatment by his parents. A motif can be traced through the biography, which links his childhood feelings of abandonment by his parents, with behaviours throughout his life. When Dickens was twelve his father was incarcerated in Marshalsea Prison for debt, and took all the family except the young Charles and his older sister to live there with him. His sister, Fanny, lived at the Royal Academy of Music and was protected, to some extent, from the disgrace. But Charles' father committed him to a lonely life in
a rented room, and to taking responsibility for the family by working in a blacking factory.

This episode in his life was clearly traumatic for Dickens, and Ackroyd was probably justified by giving it prominence as a central determining factor in Dickens' personality. Moreover, it serves his metabiographical purpose as well. By interanimating this event with Dickens' fiction, Ackroyd imposes a pattern on the life of Dickens which is schematically related to Dickens' fictional passages. The effect is that, by ingenious allusion to some of Dickens' most memorable images, the issue of the relationship between a writer's work and his deeper consciousness is highlighted.

One example is Ackroyd's interpretation of a passage towards the end of *Hard Times*. He relates the image of Gradgrind's son capering around him, a clown with blackened face and hands, to Dickens' "nightmare of degradation ... before his father .... Swallowed up, at last, by his past" (*D*: 748). Worthen's comments on Ackroyd's over-emphasis on Dickens' life being comprehended in terms of "the power of the father" are justified (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 235). The biography begins
with reference to Dickens' father, who almost seems to manifest as a ghost behind Dickens' deathbed \((D : xi)\). It ends with an emphasis on Dickens' last walk at Gad's Hill, the last house he bought as a family residence, suggesting it had been anticipated thirty years before, in his first novel, *Oliver Twist* \((D : 1137)\). Ackroyd constructs a cyclic life pattern, driven by Dickens' early experience when his father pointed out the house to him as a worthy ambition. It is an effective way of examining an important issue of biography.

The design is also very effective as a narrative device, but the criticism might be levelled that Ackroyd is sacrificing the complexity of Dickens' personality and motivation, and the accuracy of the biography, for the narrative expedient. It is also a highly problematic way of understanding Dickens, as evidenced by more professional opinions. Storr understands Dickens' behaviour quite differently. He recognises his depression as a common psychiatric disorder of writers. In the nature/nurture debate, he considers personality to be not only a reflection of childhood experience, but a "coherent whole" of character traits, temperamental qualities, intellectual abilities and deficiencies, with which he or she has been
endowed by nature" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 79). Storr's reservations about psychiatry's relationship to literary biography are particularly relevant to an examination of Dickens, as they raise further questions about Ackroyd's authority to 'psychologise' on the basis of Dickens' fiction.

But the problem faced by Ackroyd, when dealing with Dickens' writing, is more complicated than separating the deeper truths of his art from the personal, everyday details of his existence. A characteristic of Dickens, which Ackroyd acknowledges, is his unreliability with regard to the truth. An alternative truth, an intuitive truth, perhaps, is called on by Ackroyd, to deal with this problem, and he balances it against the known factual material. He uses a variety of terms: "another truth" (D: 1027), "a truth" (D: 1059), "an essential truth" (D: 1147) are some of the ways in which he refers to this concept in biography. Ackroyd adheres to a position that the biographer's task is to discern an essential truth amongst the conflicting sources. His 'essential truth' of biography is somewhat different from the notion of artistic truth which, as I will show later in this chapter, underpins Byatt's narrative theory. In fact, Ackroyd is less inclined to the idea of a 'higher
truth', in James' terms, than to a belief that the biographer must deal with the writer's creative licence, which Ackroyd almost equates with an inability to separate the truth from invention.

One of the major difficulties of writing a life of Dickens must be his obsession with concealing his personal life from public scrutiny. Dickens, more than most people, was intent on dividing his life "into its public and private compartments, with all the energy and passion of his nature devoted to a 'romance' which the world would hardly understand" (D: 1031). Despite the magnitude of the surviving documents about Dickens' life, Ackroyd faces the problem of all Dickens' biographers: that many details of his life were deliberately concealed.

Ackroyd's discursive passages about Dickens' habit of secrecy and his lack of truthfulness foreground the problem he had in writing Dickens' biography. Curiously, given his interanimation of fact and fiction in Dickens' life, there is more than a suggestion, by Ackroyd, that Dickens was unable to separate reality from his imaginative life. Such a subject presents a challenge, perhaps even an invitation to an intrepid
researcher, to uncover the truth. Ackroyd presents Dickens' propensity to 'invention' as a significant component of his personality, and one which, as a biographer, he must take into account.

An incident is described by Ackroyd which exemplifies the dangers of relying on what the subject says about his or her own life. When Dickens was about to depart on a reading tour of America, he repeatedly denied reports that he was travelling to America simply to take a much needed rest from his writing. Despite clear evidence to the contrary, Dickens denied, in a number of letters to the papers, that he was ill or that he had consulted doctors. According to Ackroyd (D: 1059), he even went so far as to insist that he had not had a headache for twenty years, a statement which was far from the truth. Ackroyd goes on to explain: "But the truth was always a very fluid concept for Dickens: he did not so much lie as believe in whatever he said at the time" (D: 1059).

Ackroyd discusses a concept of there being levels of truth in Dickens' writing, in the notes which follow the biography:
The fictional accounts can be taken as just that - fiction, even though there are many passages in the novels which reflect aspects of Dickens' childhood aspirations. Then there are the essays ... [in which] there tends to be a charming if sometimes confusing mixture of fictional narrative and pure memory. And then there is the famous "autobiographical fragment" ... [in which] is to be found an essential truth about Dickens' childhood (D: 1147).

Ackroyd confesses that Dickens' "aptitude for fiction was such that not all his reminiscences are free of invention", but claims to be able to extract truth from "the general drift of the narrative" (D: 1147).

The difficulties of sifting the truth of a man whose nature had a remarkable duality can be seen at many stages of the biography. Ackroyd, however, finds an answer to any criticism of Dickens' distortion of the truth: it is part of his belief in the world and characters of his own fiction. The imaginative and creative mind of an artist, Ackroyd seems to be saying, has a truth of its own which is carried over into his relations with the real world. The issue of truth, according to Ackroyd, seems
to come down to a matter of artistic licence which must be given to writers, regardless of the purpose or form of the writing.

It is interesting to juxtapose events which illustrate Dickens' pragmatism with regard to truth. While on a reading tour of America, he visited a school ship and told the boys "to think of [him] as a visitor ... who told you above all to tell the truth as being the best way and the only way to earn God's blessing" (D: 1069). This can only be seen as pure rhetoric, when another instance is considered of Dickens' consistent fictionalising to present himself in a good light.

One particularly unsavoury example relates to his treatment of his wife, Catherine, after their separation. So necessary did Dickens find it to defend himself from society's reproach, that he attacked Catherine publically, declaring her to have been a disinterested mother whose children had never loved her. Ackroyd admits that, on the children's own evidence, this was untrue (D: 856). Dickens insisted that the children stayed with him and, by threatening her with a severely reduced income, forced Catherine to set up house elsewhere. His behaviour was
thus greatly at odds with his public image as the champion of home and hearth.

But the important point in relation to this argument is Ackroyd’s reaction to these events. He finds a partial mitigation of Dickens’ dishonesty and betrayal in his inability to separate real events from those of his fiction. Ackroyd denies that Dickens was simply lying to protect himself: "For him, nothing was real until it was written down". His imagery of the unnatural mother (Catherine) "was all now true for him" (D : 857). Like Forster, who wrote the first biography of Dickens, Ackroyd follows the Victorian model of assisting his subject’s 'lying-in-state'. He finds a way of minimising the negative elements of Dickens’ personality. For Ackroyd, it is the notion of truth being relative; the creative artist has his own truth. Ackroyd examines the unstable nature of truth, and the problematic reliance on authority, in a form which relies for its credibility on its claims to be based on facts.

By his methodology, Ackroyd addresses the questions of truth and authority which preoccupy contemporary theorists and, in effect, lays them out for examination. He acknowledges
the possibility of his own fallibility as a biographer, especially
given the elusive nature of his subject. The bottom line for
Ackroyd, though, is that separating "the real truths from the
penumbra of romance, nostalgia and fantasy" is the task of the
biographer (D: 1147). Ackroyd's opinion, made quite explicitly
in his metabiography, is that "there are levels of truth ... an
essential truth" to which the biographer can aspire (D: 1147).
Ultimately, Ackroyd's affirmation of the biographer's role is
evident in his tone of assurance that he is able to transmit this
"essential truth", as he terms it (D: 1147).

Byatt's novel, Possession, when added to Ackroyd's
comment and practice of biography, widens our understanding of
the problems faced by biographers and their readers with regard
to the transmission of truth in biography. Byatt's work, like
Ackroyd's, is also concerned with the inter-relationship of
truth and authority, and the tension which exists between the
expression of mundane reality and imaginative flight.

Byatt's approach can be compared with Ackroyd's relentless
unsettling of truth, in all but the fictional or poetic areas. In
this respect, Byatt's approach is reminiscent of Woolf's. Both
privilege the truth of fiction. Byatt's scholars bring imagination to the facts about their Victorian subjects, and thus the figures live on, as Woolf would have it, "in the depths of the mind" (in Woolf L. ed. 1967: 228). But these facts generate a more significant outcome, in Byatt's terms, than the writing of a biography; Roland's imagination is liberated to the extent that he begins to write poetry. The isolated words he had kept in lists in "some well in him", form

patterns made by a voice he didn't yet know, but which was his own ... he saw he had things he could say about the way shapes came and made themselves ... an hour before there had been no poems, and now they came like rain and were real (P: 475).

The patterns are formed by creative inspiration. They are distinguished, by Byatt, from the patterns which a biographer makes out of the facts at his or her disposal. Somehow, the poems which are 'real' are the ultimate expression for Roland. His careful, scholarly studies are granite compared with the rainbow of his creativity.

Byatt's narrative demonstrates that we cannot know the
whole truth of past lives. For Byatt, certainty lies in the truth of the creative imagination. But while imagination can provide a connection with lives under investigation, this cannot be confused with knowing the totality of the subject's life, as many of the facts about it have been obscured intentionally, or by natural attrition. Thus, although Possession indicates Byatt's interest in past lives, and affirms their resurrection, she subverts the pompous authority of the biographer's claims to transmit truth.

Caroline Webb draws parallels between A.S. Byatt and Virginia Woolf in her paper "History Through Metaphor: Woolf's Orlando and Byatt's Possession: A Romance", a contribution to Selected Papers from the Third Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf (1993). Webb claims that the manner of perceiving the present in the past, employed by both writers, is achieved by the power of metaphor which, although it has its own problems of validity,
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Avery fun-ny - and the de-tach-ment that ena-bles our amuse-ment may also lead to our witting (or witty) subver-sion of the phal-logoc-en-tric claim to fig-ure the real (1993: 188).

Ac-cord-ing to Webb, de-spite the dan-ger-ous of "co-lo-nising lan-guage" (1993: 187), Byatt and Woolf both pre-fer meta-pher to lit-er-al de-scrip-tion of past lives, for it is a par-tial solu-tion to the prob-lem of de-scrib-ing a person from an-o ther world ade-qua-tely, and it is less of a lin-guis-tic ap-pro-pria-tion of that world and that per-son-al-i ty. Fig-ur-a-tive vis-ion, which re-quires an act of im-a-gina-tion, re-quires the skills of the chro-nicler/his-to-ri-an to be com-bined with those of the lit-er-ary artist. Orland-o and Pos-ses-sion, how-ev-er, both ex-press their au-thors' am-bival-ence about whether such a con-ju-nction in bio-gra-phy can o-ver come the prob-lems of char-acter be-ing af-fected by time and idea.

achieves satisfying "closure" to the story by offering "hidden" information available only to the artistic insight which can imagine the other, creating "imagined lives" for historically defined characters based on what we know of their history and of our present moment (1995: 170).

Shinn suggests that Byatt's work demonstrates her belief that imaginative history is needed to tell the whole story of her Victorian poets. The literary artist is needed to "penetrate the silences" which, intentionally or inadvertently, permeate past lives (1995: 172). In "Lindsay Clarke and A.S. Byatt: The Novel on the Threshold of Romance", Lund cites a comment, relevant to this discussion, which was made by Lawrence Durrell, in Deus Loci: The Lawrence Durrell Journal. Durrell wrote:

We get too certain of ourselves traveling backwards and forwards along the tramlines of empirical fact. Occasionally one gets hit softly on the head by a stray brick which has been launched from some other region (1993: 158).
According to Lund, "the other region is the region of spirit, imagination, and dream" (1993: 158), all found within the world of Possession. The fragmented results of purely empirical fact, Byatt shows us, cannot be taken as the only truth, but the region of imagination, necessary to the biographer, crosses the boundary of verifiable fact, and thus of authoritative biography.

As Byatt shows us through her characterisation of the fictional Ash, it can be a very difficult task to penetrate the private life of a writer. The truth of Ash’s hidden life was buried very carefully, and it is only because of Maud's intuition that some revelatory letters are discovered, which were hinted at in their recipient's riddle. In "History Through Metaphor: Woolf's Orlando and Byatt's Possession: A Romance", Webb reminds us that "Dolly keeps a Secret", LaMotte's poem, has a metaphorical, as well as a literal meaning in the novel (1993: 183). It suggests that the evasive fragments of writing, left by nineteenth-century women to posterity, mock our ignorance about the true nature of their lives. The device also propels the plot, however, because 'Dolly' also conceals the letters which tell a story, undisclosed by Ash’s poetry, after a century of scholarly investigation. The letters written by Ash destroy all
the scholarly assumptions about his life, as well as previously-held beliefs about the meaning of his poetry.

In *Possession*, Byatt adds to the body of theory concerned with the insights about the character of a writer which might be derived from his or her work. This is particularly relevant to the writing of biography, as is the related issue of which truths can be taken as absolute about a writer's work. Byatt's narrative demonstrates the misconceptions that can arise from interpretations of a writer's character based on definitive meanings of his or her works. She represents this method as doubly hazardous. *Possession*, however, testifies to Byatt's belief that there is an essential truth which can be derived from imaginative fiction, distinguishing what is, arguably, a higher, or a different truth than a finite interpretation of the meaning of a text. The idea is raised by means of her protagonists, Roland and Maud, in their investigation of the Victorian poets, Ash and LaMotte, and in the nature of the secret truths that they discover.

Yelin's comments, in *Victorian Newsletter*, on "Cultural Cartography: A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and the Politics of
Victorian Studies" (1992), bear on a discussion of the nature of truth in a text, as well as the difficulties of "reading or misreading texts about which we are more or less ignorant" (1992: 38). According to Yelin, Byatt invites us to seek after secret truths like the truth about what really happened between Ash and LaMotte but, at the same time, insists that "the only truths to which we can gain access are the partial truths of history and textuality" (1992: 39). Yelin claims that Byatt draws attention to textual conventions of omniscient narration which tells us secrets about the past, otherwise denied us, yet Byatt "makes at least an implicit claim to possess Victorian secrets known or knowable to no one else" (1992: 40). When Roland decides to write poetry, it is seen, by Byatt, as a triumph over critical scholarship. Yet the scholars, critics and poets are reconciled at the end of Possession. As Yelin puts it: "the novel does resolve at least provisionally its version of the contest of faculties" (1992: 39). The meeting place is, arguably, in the essential understandings grasped through the imagination.

Byatt initially approaches the debate over the question of truth-value in writing by means of Ash's voice, captured in his
recovered letters. Roland is aware, very early in his reading of the correspondence from Ash to LaMotte, of the importance of the personal letters written by Ash. They add a dimension to Ash’s interior life that is not evident in his other remaining correspondence. Nor is it necessarily explicit in his creative writing. The letters explain Ash’s conception of the life of the mind which transcends his everyday being. The initial connection with LaMotte is made because she is able to understand this inner life. Ash tells her: "I have tried to tell you my truth ... But you know - I do believe you know" (P: 169). This, then, is the primary connection between them; it is not initially a sexually-driven association.

Roland realises that the letters to LaMotte have an urgency about them which generates, for Roland, an image of Ash which was quite different from the carefully wise, witty letters which he had written to his publisher, his god-daughter and his literary friends. The letters to LaMotte appear to tell more about the inner consciousness of Ash than his other letters or his poetry because, even when subject to his drafting process, they seem to contain powerful, spontaneous feelings which arise from his need to discuss his ideas with someone who is on
his creative level. The letters reveal the writer's life of the mind. Ash tells LaMotte that his letters to her are like his true writing, his poetry, in that they contain truth at the deepest level, but the letters are an explicit statement of Ash's philosophy. Roland is aware, however, that, unlike the poems which were constructed for a public readership,

_These letters, these busy passionate letters, had never been written for him to read - as Ragnarok had, as Mummy Possesst had, as the Lazarus poem had. They had been written for Christabel LaMotte (P: 131)._ 

After being established as authentic expressions of Ash's feelings, the letters serve as a vehicle for Byatt to convey her theories about the divide between the writer's inner self and his or her work. Ash reminds LaMotte, in his first letter, that she had remarked, rightly, that his personae are not his masks. In other words, readers looking at, say, the perverse tastes of the characters in his dramatic poems would be wrong to imagine that these characters were constructed in Ash's image. Roland knows that "Ash liked his characters at, or over the edge of madness, constructing systems of belief and survival
from the fragments of experience available to them" (P : 7). But all the evidence pointed to the fact that Ash was essentially a sane man. His poetry revealed an interest in the strange and the arcane aspects of human nature, but it was not confessional.

Although the truth of Ash's identity is not to be found in his dramatic monologues, there is another truth in his art. When he writes to LaMotte of his doubts about the truth of Lazarus rising from the dead, he has no doubt that "the absolute truth" is that "Poetry can make that man live" (P : 168). He tells LaMotte "the only life I am sure of is the life of the Imagination" (P : 168). The analogy is that his poetry itself brings Ash to life, but not as psychoanalytic analysis has it, as the basis of a case study of the writer's psychology. It is his creative mind which lives on in imaginative expression of the subjects that interest him.

Roland makes a connection with the life of the imagination in Ash's poem, "The Garden of Proserpina", in a cathartic experience in another garden, one from which Roland has previously been excluded. After his long search to reach Ash through the details of his secret life, he finally understands the
poet's words. He realises the true nature of his quest as he faces the dragon-eyes of a number of ravenous cats, in a garden which "seemed smaller, but still mysterious" \((P: 474)\). He remembers Ash's words:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{There is a place to which all Poets come} \\
\text{Some having sought it long, some unawares,} \\
\text{Some having battled monsters, some asleep} \\
\text{Who chance upon the path in thickest dream ...}
\end{align*}
\]

\(These\ \text{things are there (P: 463).}\)

When Roland re-reads the poem he hears Ash's voice and "he heard the language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single human, writer or reader \((P: 472)\). All the knowledge, all the facts, all the careful textual analysis on which Roland had previously focussed are meaningless compared with the language of poetry: "Ash had started him on this quest" but now "all was cast off" \((P: 472)\). His own creativity is liberated. Roland's 'patterns of language' are more powerful, according to Byatt, than the patterns established by many authoritative scholars - patterns, perhaps, like those which Ackroyd imposes on the details of Dickens' fiction.
Ash is very persuasive when he writes to LaMotte that his letters to her are the truth in the way his "true" writing, his poetry, is. Because she, too, is a poet he claims: "I write to you as I write when I am alone" (P: 131), and he asserts that she is privy to something in him which he has never addressed to any private individual before. The letters give us an insight into his deepest thoughts and beliefs which he enacts in his poetry. His letters to LaMotte are concerned with his personal philosophy concerning the relationship between art and existence, and these beliefs are put into practice in his poetry in constructed characters and situations. Ash's poetry expresses his truth, but it is a result of his observations of human nature and the universe, which as he puts it, "must be loved in its particularity ... for its universal life in every minute particular" (P: 132). His art, then, is not merely a reflection of his private life.

Byatt also conveys a significant point that a greater understanding of Ash, both as the private man and the public poet, is gained when the whole scope of his life is examined. Without knowledge of the nature of the Ash/LaMotte relationship, essential aspects of Ash's personality are not apparent. Conversely, understandings about LaMotte's life and
work are enlarged by this knowledge. In Chapter 3, I will show how, together, Byatt's and Ackroyd's works invite us to examine issues of gender in biography. This chapter deals with the negation of women in nineteenth-century biography and shows why the tradition of viewing biography as a male contract was so firmly in place. The authority of the biographer, from this vantage point, will be examined in the light of Possession and Dickens.

It is probably well known by late twentieth-century readers that truths gained by a biographer might only be partial truths, but current theory of biography has the effect of drawing attention to the efforts made by reputable biographers. Recognising that cultural change is inevitably rung in on descriptions of past lives, they still attempt to distill the essence of a life and time. Perhaps, after all, this is the reason why biography is, in Holmes' words, "the most lovable of modern English literary forms". A biographer tries "to tell the truth, and to enlighten and encourage us in so doing" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 25). Byatt and Ackroyd would both agree that this is the biographer's raison d'être. Both would agree, I feel sure, that fiction and biography are equally constructs.
Where they differ is that Byatt implies that the claim of truth in biography is partial, at best, while there is, she asserts, a truth which is discernible in art. Ackroyd's understanding is that truth takes many forms, but there is an essential truth which can be intuited by an experienced biographer. It would appear from an examination of these two works, however, that their different perspectives might be reconciled. Creative inspiration and biography may co-exist. On this rests Ackroyd's certainty of the biographer's authority. Another aspect of the issue of authority which remains in dispute, however, is a matter for the next chapter. It concerns the authority traditionally granted to the male biographer: to speak for women.
Chapter three

Authority and the representation of women

A corollary of the issue of authority, which was discussed in Chapter 2, concerns the representation of women in biography. The intersection of the metabiographies, Possession and Dickens, brings issues of representation and engendered texts into relief. Although I will argue that both works serve as critiques of the manner in which women are represented in biography, there is a significant difference in the approach used by Byatt and Ackroyd. Ackroyd enacts the conventional nineteenth-century biography in his representation of the women in his subject's life. His work demonstrates how effectively this model of biography, ensconced in the symbolic order characteristic of Dickens' era, reduces the significance of women in the life of this quintessentially patriarchal figure. After reading Possession, we have a new understanding of the silences and omissions, and the patterns of behaviour of the women whom Ackroyd discusses in his biography of Dickens. The reader's attention is drawn to the confluence of Ackroyd's voice with that of Dickens, as Ackroyd colludes with the values
of nineteenth-century culture in his construction of a biography about a powerful and public male figure.

Ackroyd's attention is focussed almost entirely on the central figure of Dickens, and he naturalises the silence of the women in Dickens' life, representing them in terms of the cultural fictions of the period. His interest is in the documents written by men, and he uses this evidence as his authority to represent and speak for women. In her examination of a period contemporaneous with Dickens' era, Byatt represents women differently, showing the way the suppressed voices of women can be heard in alternative forms of writing, expressing rebellion, ambivalence, confusion and desire. These aspects of women's emotional life are not evident in Ackroyd's traditionally male perspective. Byatt's text has the effect of raising our awareness of issues of gender in biography, which are exemplified in Ackroyd's work.

Many theorists in the twentieth century have contributed to theories of gender in writing, and from these I have selected some key figures who inform an approach to reading Possession and Dickens. From her vantage point of the early twentieth
century, Virginia Woolf surveys the effects of sexual constraint on women's place in writing, in her feminist polemic, *A Room of One's Own* (1993). When we read Woolf, we are reminded of many of the ideas developed by the French theorists, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, who posited alternative ways of looking at the feminine in relation to language and writing. Woolf's comments, particularly those concerning nineteenth-century writing, illuminate the reasons why women did not write books about men, at least, men who lived in fact, and why women are absented from the pages of nineteenth-century lives. "History is too much about wars", and "biography too much about great men" (1993: 98), Woolf writes, and goes on to show how narrow this view is. Woolf's work helps us to understand the complications of Victorian women's representation in a culture which privileged the voices of men.

Woolf outlines a number of reasons why women were not encouraged to write, and comments on the way in which women were represented in a discussion which ranges from medieval times to her own era. She writes ironically of the "'chivalrous' upper classes" of the fifteenth century, referring to the ill-treatment that women were liable to receive (1993: 39), and
the religious importance of chastity in a woman's life. From this time, according to Woolf, we can trace "the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century" (1993: 46). Thus originated the ideology of the nineteenth century that publicity in women is abhorrent. Woolf lists the names Currer Bell, George Eliot and George Sand, as evidence of the desire felt by women writers in the nineteenth century, to retain anonymity and thus avoid loss of reputation and probable public censure.

In Private Lives of Victorian Women: Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century England (1989), Valerie Sanders explains that, since attracting public attention was inimical to the feminine ideal, women transgressed society's conventions by the act of writing. Sanders describes the alternative forms of writing adopted by women in deference to society's sense of propriety. Diaries, letters, and domestic manuals all evaded accusations of egotism, while enabling women, covertly, to communicate their achievements and assert their views. Examples of these forms can be found in Possession, and an examination of these fictional fragments will be made in this chapter, to reveal the subterfuges about which Sanders writes.
An important deterrent to aspiring nineteenth-century women writers was the fact that prevailing masculine values were transferred into women's writing, with regard to what was considered significant. In *Private Lives of Victorian Women*, Valerie Sanders writes that "conventionally female moments are not assigned privileged status" in women's writing (1989: 21), referring to marriage or childbirth, for instance. Such moments of domesticity were considered inappropriate for publication for reasons of privacy or decency. Women's lack of experience beyond the narrow confines of the domestic situation rendered their writing insignificant. Woolf critiques this world-view sixty years earlier: "A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop" (1993: 67). Woolf thus maintains that women's voices tended to be conciliatory, in deference to male authority, and apologetic about subject matter.

A currently held belief of the nineteenth century, which must have discouraged many women from writing, is voiced by Woolf's representative, "Professor X", in his "monumental work entitled "The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the
Female Sex" (1993: 28). The prevailing belief that women were intellectually inferior to men would naturally be discouraging to women, according to Woolf. She claims that men's confident assurance that they were superior to half of the population legitimated their authoritative voice, and explains that it was essential to men's continuing confidence that women did not have the opportunity to challenge this belief. Woolf suggests, however, that if she were brave, a woman should

\[\text{go behind the other sex and tell us what she found there. A true picture of man as a whole can never be painted unless a woman has described that spot the size of a shilling (1993: 82).}\]

Thus she argues for the woman's perspective, whereby "new facts are bound to be discovered" about the relative superiority of men (1993: 82).

Woolf was aware, however, of the influences that were against this option in the nineteenth century. Forces marshalled against women's writing were associated, by Woolf, with her mode of life. Constant interruptions, and a lack of
privacy in which to write, were normal conditions of a woman's life. In practical terms, a woman had little autonomy until, after 1880, a married woman was allowed by law to possess her own property. This, according to Woolf, was a crucial determining factor in women's independence, and in opening possibilities to would-be women writers.

Another serious disadvantage to those who wished to write concerned the lack of tradition behind women since, as Woolf puts it: "we think back through our mothers" (1993: 69). The 'man's sentence' is unsuited to women's use, Woolf claims, and suggests that a new vehicle is needed for her writing. Woolf anticipates the debate, by feminist critics today, about whether there is a 'feminine' mode of writing. She is critical of what is now perceived as the symbolic order of language, the patriarchal sexual and social order of society. In her essay, "The System and the Speaking Subject" (1973), Julia Kristeva opposes the symbolic order with the semiotic which, according to Kristeva, is the play of forces within language representing the residue of the pre-oedipal stage. In an essay, "The Life of the Medusa" (1976), Hélène Cixous associates the semiotic system with female sexuality, which subverts the logic of male
power systems and discourse. Cixous' poetic vision is one whereby women put their bodies into their writing. Many years earlier, Woolf, too, challenged sexual and social power by positing a kind of semiotic. In *A Room of One's Own*, she admires the directness, and the straightforward quality of a hypothetical work, written towards the end of the nineteenth century, by a man. She acknowledges the freedom of mind and the confidence of the person whose 'I' lies across the page (1993: 90). But Woolf writes: "the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman" (1993: 90). In Woolf's opinion, such writing is arid, and its creative energy, impeded by the writer's need to assert his superiority, is limited and narrow.

Woolf identifies elements in women's writing which, in her view, are not apparent in the writing of men who only write with the male side of their brains, with what she describes as self-conscious virility. "It is the power of suggestion that one most misses", she claims (1993: 91). Woolf suggests that a great mind is androgynous, sketching a plan in which the two elements in a brain might live in harmony. Her blueprint for spiritual co-operation has, as its basis, the notion of a man's
brain being predominantly male, and a woman's brain being predominantly female. By encompassing both elements, a writer has a more creative capacity, according to Woolf. Although later feminist theories argue against the notion of essential difference between a man's and a woman's intellectual make-up, the importance of Woolf's ideas is widely acknowledged. They provided the vanguard of a movement to undermine the dichotomising of men's and women's intellectual attributes which impacted so negatively on writing practices in the nineteenth century. This male/female dichotomy resulted in feminised forms of writing being evolved by women. In a Catch 22 situation, women internalised the ideology which de-valued women's forms of writing, the only authorised forms available to them.

In Private Lives of Victorian Women: Autobiography in Nineteenth Century England (1989), Valerie Sanders writes that even the authorised forms of writing, domestic manuals, diaries and letters, commonly had a pattern of self-negation, in line with current ideology. Sanders explains a phenomenon which is evident in women's writing of the period:
They were not consistently in conflict with the dominant culture; indeed, they actively contributed to its formation, frequently reinforcing images of the feminine ideal, and upholding traditional notions of the domestic and dependent womenly stereotype (1989: 164).

They endorsed traditional notions, then, but not consistently. Sanders discusses the "motif of the 'double life' [which] haunts self-writing by Victorian women" (164). This sub-text reveals that conventional readings of Victorian women's writing do not lay bare the fictions of their representation. By recourse to one woman's work of the Victorian period, Sidonie Smith demonstrates why these fictions have become embedded in its literature.

In *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987), Sidonie Smith critiques the ideology of gender, and its impact on autobiography from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. She establishes a theoretical framework by which to read a representative Victorian woman's text and, in this way, leads us to an understanding of the competing fictions of women's identity, and the assumptions which informed their representation in
conventional biography in the nineteenth century.

Smith writes about the difficulties faced by women who brought their experience to the autobiographical form which was developed and privileged by patriarchal authorities. The same set of conditions affect the fitting of women's lives into the androcentric model of biography which existed in nineteenth-century Britain and which, directly and indirectly, Byatt and Ackroyd critique. Smith explains that most women turned to their private journals because they lacked the sense of authority to write for public display. This attitude derived from notions of women's intellectual difference and a cultural ideology which demanded significance in the subject's life. Smith's comments, thus far, echo those of Woolf, but Smith goes further in explaining these ideas which had currency in the Victorian period.

Smith claims that, in the nineteenth century, narrative interest lay in human development, important in an age confronted by theories of evolution. She writes that there was a fascination with the idea that
an examination of biography

*at birth the mind is effectively a* tabula rasa
and that the subsequent development of the
*'innocent' child depended intimately on*

The idealised Victorian 'angel' of fiction, her sphere of activity
the home, remains the innocent child. She is of little interest
as a subject since she does not develop in terms of the
normative definition of autobiography or biography: the story of
an eminent figure in the public arena. In this guise, she is
"unrepresented and unrepresentable" (1987: 49).

Furthermore, faced with a cultural ideology which considers
an ideal identity for her to be one which does not intrude on the
public sphere, a woman has a troubled relationship with her
readers if she tries to represent herself. By writing, not only
does she transgress the model of female identity, since her
writing is a public expression, but also, according to Smith, she
speaks before man, as he dominates the public arena. She
responds in a "complex double-voicedness, a fragile
heteroglossia" (1987: 50). What can be seen in her writing is,
in Smith's terms, "leakages, ... fractures along fault lines"
(1987: 51). A sense of self can be discerned, which contradicts
her self-representation in the time-honoured cultural fiction. Smith claims intelligence and courage for the women who write in this cultural climate, but she also asserts "the damages to women of seeking to appropriate the story of man in a culture that would condemn her to silence" (1987: 62). The women's writings express compromise and ambivalence. When Smith explores the writings of women from societies that would seek to silence their voices, she allows us to interpret them in more complex ways. Byatt, too, is interested in the complexities of the sub-texts which can be discerned in Victorian women's voices, but her voices are fictional.

Byatt fictionalises the complexities of Victorian women's response to society in the pastiche of forms which make up Possession. These forms reveal why women are so often absented from Victorian biography, either as reputable sources, or as artists in their own right. Fredric Jameson describes the characteristic postmodern literary form as pastiche, in Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991), (in A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader, eds. Easthope, A. & McGowan, K. 1992: 197). The jumble of literary styles and techniques used by many postmodernist writers is seen by
Jameson to be "a neutral practice of [such] mimicry ... amputated of the satiric impulse" (1992: 197). In Chapter 4, I will write at greater length about how Byatt's assemblage of styles, writings by fictional men and women, foregrounds the relationship between textuality and fictionality in biography. But the pastiche of feminised forms of writing in Possession is also useful for an examination of the tensions felt by women writers, and the serious implications this had for biography.

These models of writing provide an arena in which to examine many of the ideas raised by Woolf, and developed by successive feminist theorists. Byatt's work reveals the strained social and linguistic climate for women writers in the nineteenth century which affected their representation in all writing forms, including biography. Amongst these forms, Byatt constructs journals and letters in the Victorian style which illuminate why women were, effectively, absented from biography. On the surface, the writing minimises women's importance in the literary context. There is, however, a rhetorical significance to be found in these women's texts which is apparent when they are examined in the light of the critical texts of Valerie Sanders and Sidonie Smith. Byatt
enacts the rhetorical strategies of women writers whereby
they reinforce the ideology of the feminine ideal but, at the
same time, hint at the double life of women. In this way, Byatt
challenges the traditional notion of the domestic and dependent
'good and little' Victorian woman characteristically informing
Dickens' writing, and on which Ackroyd draws in his
representation of the significant women in Dickens' life.

When Byatt elaborates on what Victorian women's writing
conceals, she questions the possibility of writing, without the
benefit of this perspective, an authentic life of someone living
in the nineteenth century. She emphasises that women's
significance in the area of biography has traditionally been
overlooked. In effect, she writes a revisionist history which
calls into question the representations of women which have
previously been authorised. Her pastiche of women's writing of
the Victorian period undermines some of the late twentieth-
century misconceptions about the Victorian culture. The
fictional extracts from correspondence, journals, and literature
give voice to women's experience but, paradoxically, they
construct a version of experience which Byatt then
deconstructs. In this way she revises the notion of the "generic
Victorian lady" (P: 38). We learn that twentieth-century beliefs concerning relations of power and the sexual repression of Victorian women fail to explain the complexity of women's experience. Byatt gives us a different 'truth' about the relationships between Victorian men and women which bears strongly on biographical practice in that, and in our present era. I will provide specific textual examples which demonstrate this cultural climate shortly.

Byatt reveals the inherently fictional element in the forms of expression commonly used by Victorian women: the different forms of journals and letters. She juxtaposes fragments of fictional women's writing with narrative passages which illuminate the evasive quality of the writing. The documents tell a partial truth, but this truth, limited though it might be, undermines contemporary assumptions about Victorian culture, especially when Byatt fills in the gaps in the documents. Byatt exposes different narratives of justice and emancipation from those of the twentieth century, but also shows diversity within the Victorian society itself. By privileging and pluralising the experience of women, she is able to lay bare the hegemonic process by which such writings have constructed 'a truth' about
Victorian society. She demonstrates how different elements have worked together to give us a single 'truth' about the Victorian period which is highly problematised by an informed analysis of the writings of different women, and by positing them against one another. Thus the authority of an historically removed biographer is also undermined, when he or she does not take into account the gap between the surface message of the writings of literate middle class women, and the multiple realities of women's experience. In effect, she suggests that that kind of biography is a kind of fiction.

For example, the representations of Ellen Ash and Christabel LaMotte, both educated, middle class women, and of Bertha, the Ash's servant, give lie to the accepted, reductive notion of the 'Victorian woman'. In the conjunction of these people's lives, we are faced with complex relationships between power and discourse which force us to evaluate previously held convictions about Victorian worlds. It becomes clear that a Victorian man's biography, which does not take into account these complex power relationships, is perpetuating a fiction.
Ellen Ash's journal represents the type of women's writing which, on first glance, describes the world and attitudes of a stereotypical Victorian middle class woman. It describes a life of self-effacement, and a sense of duty to create a domestic haven for her "dear Randolph" (P: 222). On the surface, Ellen's journal is concerned with "projects for improvements in his comfort to be effected while he is away" (P: 222). We are privy to her anxieties about running the household and managing the domestic staff, and her relationship with her sister, Patience, and Patience's children. Beneath this conventional representation of her life, an exemplary model of female domesticity and devotion to others, however, runs another set of preoccupations.

Ellen's journal expresses ambivalence about conforming to the patriarchal order of her society. Her expressed interest in her husband's literary life and her tentative questionings about the impact of science on religious faith are intended, by Ellen, to reveal a clear intelligence. She hints at an identity which runs counter to her culture's beliefs about women. Her journal expresses doubts, however, about whether this kind of mental activity is fitting for a woman. She writes in her journal that
her pastor, appropriately called Mr Baulk, "tells me I should not trouble my intellect with questions which my intuition (which he qualifies as womanly, virtuous, pure and so on and so on) can distinguish to be vain ... well I assent. I do assent" (P: 223). We sense her difficulties in reconciling Baulk's concept of a 'womanly intuition' with her superior intellectual ability.

Although Ellen constructs a culturally approved character for herself in her journal, it cannot be taken at face value. There is deference to male authority which accords with the stereotypical Victorian woman who entirely subscribes to a patriarchal system, but one can discern an ironic tone in Ellen's journal, at least in her references to Pastor Baulk. After playing chess with him she writes: "He was pleased to tell me that I played well for a lady - I was content to accept this, since I won handsomely" (P: 227). In her private writing, Ellen challenges the notion of male superiority very subtly, and shows considerable ambivalence about awarding undisputed authority to this particular representative of the established church. Her self-questioning suggests that Ellen had a personal set of values which did not sit quite comfortably with those of her social class. There is also a certain amount of self-
consciousness apparent in the journal, however, which suggests that she anticipated her journal would be read - rightly so, as it turns out. Ellen carefully constructs a persona which is laundered for public scrutiny, but her writing contains a subtext. She creates a story of her life with Randolph Henry Ash, but she inserts clues for posterity to trace an alternative version.

Beatrice Nest, a fictional twentieth-century university research scholar who is editing Ellen's journal, remarks that "she leads you on and baffles you. She wants you to know and not to know" (P : 485). Ellen's journal is full of tantalising evasions and euphemisms. About her love for Randolph she writes: "We have been so happy in our life together", but she crosses out the qualification, "despite all" (P : 229). By not quite erasing it, she leaves a clue and causes the reader to question whether she might be hiding something from her anticipated readers. Reading back, we wonder about "the cracks and chasms" in the surface of the chandelier droplets (P : 226). Is this a metaphor for her marriage? Ellen's journal is a masterly example of the way in which Victorian women's writing conveys a controlled version of the complex cultural
world which they inhabited.

The problem regarding Ellen's servant, Bertha, is reflected upon in the journal, and it serves as a template for Ellen's modus operandi. When Ellen's sister, Patience, realises "that something ailed Bertha, and made a shrewd guess as to what it might be" (P: 225), Ellen seeks advice from her pastor, Herbert Baulk, and her sister, about how she should deal with the unmarried Bertha's pregnancy. Both provide an unequivocal statement of society's views. Bertha must go, because "it is contaminating to continue in the presence of sin" (P: 225). Ellen allows Baulk to talk to Bertha, and to make arrangements for her to be sent to an institution. It is a harsh sentence because there is little doubt about what her position will be in the 'Magdalen Home'. Ellen writes that she will not consult Randolph, because she believes that it is her responsibility to make moral decisions for them both. In fact, the moral decision is really made by her society. Class coherence is established through the formation of shared notions of morality and respectability.

Like the crystals of the chandelier, the journal has
"fractures along the fault lines" which reveal another story, one not suitable for public scrutiny, and Ellen tells this story in veiled hints interpolated into the public face of her journal. In this way, we come to understand the real reason why Ellen did not consult her husband about the domestic crisis. Ellen writes that Bertha will not say who was responsible for her pregnancy, only making the cryptic comment: "It all continues on whatever I will" (P: 226). When told of her fate, she silently "stared and stared, breathing very heavily, and a dark plum-red in colour" (P: 229). The reader begins to suspect that Bertha remains silent because Randolph is responsible for the pregnancy. Ellen acknowledges that it is as well that Randolph was away from home, and the suggestion is made that this way she will avoid confronting him and, hopefully, repair the cracks in her marriage. Her class holds the view that marriage is sanctified and indissoluble, and Ellen has a lot to gain from this philosophy.

Ellen takes refuge from her problem, characteristically, by retiring to her darkened bedroom with a migraine headache. But her journal acknowledges her guilt over her treatment of Bertha:
I have done wrong in her regard. I have behaved less than well. Herbert Baulk is not a tactful man. But I knew that when I embarked on this course (P: 231).

Ellen crosses out her last entry: "I should have" (P: 231), thus avoiding exposing too much, and also suggesting that the matter was out of her control. By surrendering to ecclesiastical authority, she perpetuates the story of her cultural inferiority, and her own disempowerment. But this also enables her not to acknowledge unpalatable truths.

It is evident in the journal, though, that Ellen has strong feelings of conflict over this course of action. This is expressed in the form of a nervous disorder which Elaine Showalter describes as neurasthenia, in The Female Malady (1991: 134). According to Showalter, this was a socially acceptable form of female nervousness which presented in various ways, including headaches. Showalter's argument is that hysteria and neurasthenia were an expression of "longings for independence and for mastery [which] were socially unacceptable" in females in the nineteenth century (1987: 132).
Ellen's illness, in this case, might be seen as an expression of her conflict of guilt about Bertha, and social pressure which insisted that she remain silent and accept her lack of power in the situation.

Bertha, too, is silenced in Byatt's text, but there is evidence that she has a different perception of Ellen's duty from that of Patience and Baulk. We do not hear her story of exploitation and despair. She keeps silent because she knows that Ellen will not acknowledge Ash's involvement. There is no justice for Bertha, who must be sacrificed on the altar of Ash's respectability. The working-class story is unspoken and unwritten and Bertha vanishes, literally and metaphorically.

Simultaneous with the crisis of Bertha, Ellen receives an 'importunate visitor' and, although the journal tells us nothing of what they discussed, she disposes of the matter in exactly the same way: "That matter is now I hope quite at an end and wholly cleared up" (P : 231). The visitor is Blanche Glover, Christabel's companion, who is in despair over Christabel's desertion, and seeks revenge by proving to Ash's wife that Ash and Christabel LaMotte are together in Yorkshire. The journal,
significantly, does not reveal this fact though, by reading its allusions to Ellen's low spirits and recurring headache, we might infer that the matter was not wholly cleared up, at least for her.

Ellen's journal hides another terrible truth; their marriage was never consummated because of her desperate fear of the physical act of love. Randolph's 'consideration' and acceptance of this situation, his acceptance of the love she had to offer, was rewarded by Ellen. To use the term Beatrice Nest had adopted for the title of her PhD about Ellen Ash, Lady Tennyson and Jane Carlyle, she was a perfect "helpmeet" in every other way (P: 115): "She became his slave", as Ellen puts it (P: 459). The use of the term 'slave', jarringly inappropriate in the context of Victorian domestic ideology, is strongly connotative of her feeling of powerlessness in a barely tolerable situation.

Byatt leaves it to the narrative to mediate between Ellen's journal and the reader, thus conveying to the reader that women's journals of the period contained constructed life stories which were only a partial truth. The stories of Bertha, Ash's relationship with LaMotte and Ellen, and Randolph Ash's
unconsummated marriage, are all erased in the journal. After Ash’s death, the narrative reveals Ellen’s point of view on some of these erased stories. We learn that she never confronted her husband about his betrayal, but enacted a charade of the perfect Victorian marriage, her visible daily self-sacrifices concealing a different life story. But the narrative reveals that Ellen is aware of the cost:

*My life, she thought, has been built round a lie, a house to hold a lie. She had always believed, stolidly, doggedly, that her avoidance, her approximations, her whole charade as she at times saw it, were, if not justified, at least held in check, neutralised, by her rigorous requirement that she be truthful with herself (P: 457).*

Byatt gradually develops an interesting character in Ellen, but not one, perhaps, that the twentieth-century consciousness can understand very easily. The journal gives us insights about the notion of separate spheres of influence which denies the frequently held belief that Victorian women had no say in the domestic scene. Designated the moral arbiter in the household, Ellen writes about decisions that she must make because any
matter regarding the household, even when it involves a serious
dilemma, "belongs to [my] sphere of influence and
responsibility" (P : 227). Ellen gives her allegiance to this
male-defined culture and its ideology of selfhood. We can see
that Ellen has the full force of her society's mores behind her as
she makes sure that her world does not fall apart. Maintaining
her position depends on silence, however, and on tacit
acceptance of the fictions of women.

Byatt gives evidence that some Victorian women found
different ways to live their lives, by dissecting the discursive
practices of women in the Victorian period. Ellen's journal
reveals the flaws in the crystal of domestic harmony and
respectability. In Man Made Language, Dale Spender reaches
back to Emily Dickinson when she uses the term, "telling it
slant" (1992: 82). Spender is referring to the indirectness of
women's language which is a result of being forced to conform
to male requirements. Ellen's journal tells her own, and Ash's
story 'slant'. When the silences and omissions are filled in, an
alternative Ash is seen, not the person seen in Cropper's
biography. Byatt invites us to speculate about the
representation of Cropper's Ash, the exemplary Victorian
husband who, while waiting for marriage, sublimated his desires, according to Cropper's theory, in his writing (P: 110).

In addition to examining the difficulties of 'reading' women's lives from their own perspectives, Byatt also addresses the question of why women were neglected as suitable biographical subjects in the Victorian period. Poetry is the form of writing which she employs, in Possession, to illustrate the strains, both social and linguistic, which were felt by women who wanted to enter the misogynistic literary marketplace of the nineteenth century. By this means she answers the question of why women's creative writing in the Victorian period was limited, or was considered secondary to that of their male counterparts. The corollary is that women writers were rarely the subjects of biography; they were not regarded as eminent literary figures.

In Godiva's Ride (1993), Dorothy Mermin writes about the struggle of women in the nineteenth century to have their work accepted and taken seriously. Moreover, Mermin discusses the methods used by women in order to retain respectability when moving beyond the private forms of writing into the public
sphere. According to Mermin, "religious and humanitarian reasons provided justification" (1993: xvi), and served as a criterion for the worth of the writing. If it contained the virtues of piety, selflessness, sympathy, attributes emphasising the feminine virtues as they were seen, the writing was received as a legitimate part of public affairs. But, even when the weighty concerns of public life were addressed in this oblique way by women, the resultant feminisation of literature displaced their work from the traditional masculine canon.

Byatt tells the story of a fictional minor woman poet, Christabel LaMotte, whose importance was dismissed by the Victorian literary establishment. She is styled by her twentieth-century descendant, George Bailey, as not being a "real poet", like Randolph Henry Ash, but a "silly fairy poetess" who should be left in peace (P : 86). The twentieth-century scholars in Possession, however, re-evaluate her writing which had failed to meet the Victorian criterion of moral worth for women's writing. The fictional twentieth-century scholars now believe that LaMotte's poetry has been wrongly neglected. Her aspirations to formal artistry, which had been supported by
Ash, are now deemed by the scholars to be well-founded. In this way, Byatt challenges the constitution of the primarily male-authored canon which is our legacy of literature from previous centuries. Moreover, in its rich mythology and symbolism, Christabel LaMotte's poetry contains resonances of the double life of women in the Victorian era.

LaMotte is characterised as a fiercely independent woman of formidable ability. Her physically and emotionally passionate nature also refutes the common representation of the sexually repressed Victorian woman, and she stands in clear contrast to Ellen Ash in her way of dealing with the patriarchal society in which she lived. Showalter argues that "there may have been much more leeway within nineteenth-century bourgeois marriage for female sexual expression than we have realised" (1991: 132). In her characterisation of LaMotte, Byatt suggests that many of the sexual stereotypes of nineteenth-century women were another fiction of representation.

Christabel LaMotte's characterisation is designed to dispel any doubts that still remain, a legacy of past eras, of the intellectual ability of women. She embodies the marriage of
intellect with imagination, and rational thinking with intuition, which the Victorians dichotomised into masculine and feminine characteristics. Ash's draft of his first letter to Christabel registers his excitement over her "wisdom and learning"; she understands his "arcane, his deviously perspicuous meanings" which had not been understood by other readers (P : 6). Christabel's rigorous education, atypical for most women in the Victorian period, has endowed her with both sharpness of intellect, and artistry of the imagination. She, too, the later scholars discovered, was a poet of scope and ability, not recognised in her own time.

"The Fairy Melusina", LaMotte's major poem, removes her from the approved subject matter for women writers in the Victorian period. The poem is written in the elevated style of epic or heroic poetry, on serious subject matter, and based on historical and legendary material. Thus she appropriates a form usually reserved for a male writer, and is not simply the "fairy poet" that George Bailey calls her. In the Invocation, and the extract from Book 1 of the epic, Byatt gives us a taste of poetry of scope and power. By this method she demonstrates that LaMotte possessed the attributes commonly believed to be
beyond the capabilities of female writers in Victorian England.

The poem also contains a hidden message about women's situation in society which bears on LaMotte's experience in her Victorian world, where women are condemned to a purgatory in which they must forever conceal their real natures from society. Melusina is represented as a nurturing, bewitching, intuitive and emotional creature, a fairy who marries a mortal to gain a soul. Her feminine characteristics are fully expressed in her incarnation as fairy/wife. Prohibited from male gaze, however, is the other side of her being, a secret incarnation in which the lower part of her body is in the form of a snake. This incarnation might be seen as the masculine element of her nature.

The sub-text relates to LaMotte's compromise with Victorian society: "her acknowledgement of the world's expectations" (P : 278). LaMotte's life with Blanche Glover, in the little house owned by LaMotte, is insulated from the world of men's authority. When Ash draws her out of her seclusion, as if from the glass coffin of LaMotte's fairy tale, the prohibition placed on him is against his threatening of her autonomy. Her
epic poem is LaMotte's critique of the world of Victorian women, and it foreshadows her fate, condemned to live out her life crying with "pain and loss" at night, in "the castle-keep" of her sister's husband (P: 289). La Motte's poem demonstrates the "pervasive and inescapable consciousness of gender" that Mermin claims Victorian women's writing has in common (1993: xix). She defiantly appropriates the masculine genre of epic, while dealing covertly with the difficulties of women's lives in her society.

Byatt's use of postmodern pastiche, in a kind of smörgåsborg of stylistic allusion, provides echoes of Victorian poets whose experience was, in some respects, like that of the fictional LaMotte. Some aspects of Christabel LaMotte's characterisation remind the reader of Emily Dickinson: LaMotte's reclusive tendencies, and the subject matter of some of her poetry, concerned with the afterlife. There are reminders of Dickinson in the characteristic use of the dash, and the surreal style. Like Dickinson, the fictional LaMotte tried to maintain her independence in writing and in life by the simple expedient of avoiding marriage. LaMotte's deep religious faith is reminiscent of Dickinson, as it is of Christina Rossetti,
and some of LaMotte's poems resemble the religious poetry of Rossetti. LaMotte's likeness to the two poets, in whose work there is a sense of divine love transcending human passion, proves to be somewhat of a red herring, however. In LaMotte's correspondence, and the embedded narrative of her love affair with Ash, lies the evidence of a very real human passion, and an uninhibited sexuality which contrasts with preconceived ideas of Victorian women's sexuality.

The resonances in LaMotte's poetry of Rossetti's and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's subversive sequences cause other illuminating associations to be made, with regard to women writing in a male-dominated literary environment. Hilary Fraser borrows the suggestive phrase, "Love's Citadel Unmanned", for the title of her study of Victorian women's love poetry in *Constructing Gender: Feminism in Literary Studies* (1994). In this essay, she looks at Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* and Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as examples of Victorian women's poetry which challenge the male tradition of poetry, and appropriate it for their own purposes. Fraser discusses two poems in the sequences which "refer to the silence that is traditionally the woman's lot" (Fraser, H. &
White, R. eds. 1994: 137), but Rossetti and Browning subvert this convention by demonstrating that women, too, are capable of poetic talent.

There is a suggestion of LaMotte's diffidence about appropriating the male poetic voice, since she does not write in the first person in "Melusina", as do Browning and Rossetti, although she undertakes it "a little from Melusina's own vision" (P: 175). Like Rossetti and Browning, however, she adopts a form from which the female poet is traditionally excluded. Browning and Rossetti write in the sonnet form conceived by Dante and Petrarch, in which they address their silent, idealised loves: Beatrice and Laura respectively. In the characteristically self-deprecating manner of Victorian women, LaMotte describes herself as "a poor breathless woman with no staying power and only a little lunar learning" (P: 161). But she writes an epic, although most of the Victorian literary establishment is likely to mock the aspirations of a woman to such an elevated art.

LaMotte's characterisation gives pause for thought about the truth of women like Dickinson, Browning and Rossetti, who
determined to unman the citadel of the literary canon, just as Ellen Ash causes us to wonder about the silent women who made no effort to do so, in the lives of celebrated writers of the Victorian period. How much do we really know about Emily Tennyson, Ellen Ternan or Catherine Dickens, who all, arguably, had a significant role to play in the worlds they inhabited? In Woolf's speculations about the women in great men's lives, she reaches the conclusion that his ideas "would be fertilized anew" because of a natural difference of opinion between the sexes (1993: 78). She thought it would insult the men themselves to imagine that they got nothing but "comfort, flattery and the pleasures of the body" from these alliances (1993: 78). Since such women are of interest, even if only because of the part they played in the lives of the great, how accurate are the stories that we learn about them? Should we be satisfied with the authority of a male biographer whose representation of these women is as marginal beings, informed mainly by male discourse or, at best, by female discourse which often perpetuates the prevailing world view of women?

When Byatt deals with these issues in her metabiography, Possession, she leads the reader to an investigation of the
treatment of women in other biographies. This also has the effect of inviting readers to consider the reasons behind the preponderance of biographies about eminent men by male biographers, and to compare such biographies with other initiatives. An examination of the representation of Ellen Ternan in three biographies reveals how the biographer, as well as the written sources, may be responsible for the invented element in biography. One of these biographies is, of course, *Dickens*, by Ackroyd, which has already been identified as a metabiography. Such an examination suggests that, although Ackroyd does not deal directly with these issues in his work, he simulates Victorian values with regard to appropriate subjects for 'serious' biography. Since Ackroyd's biography of Dickens is profoundly allusive to Dickens' own writing, it might be argued that by enacting a biography from a male-dominated perspective, Ackroyd is examining the issues related to the engendered biography characteristic of the nineteenth century. If this is straining the point a little, it might at least be conceded that his biography serves as an interesting model for an examination of the practice.

Ellen Ternan, a woman who 'lived in fact' in Victorian
England, is a fruitful example by which to demonstrate that gender often has a bearing on the 'truth' of biography. The biographical treatment of Ellen Ternan in three texts provides an interesting range of attitudes to the importance of associated female lives, and the way in which their representation should be interrogated. Dickens' early biographers excluded her from his life because their unconventional alliance would have reflected discreditably on him. Ellen Ternan was closely associated with Dickens, but there is only a brief reference to her in the first biography written by John Forster, Dickens' long-time friend. Ellen, or Nelly as she was usually called, is only mentioned by name in an appendix to Forster's biography of Dickens. Writing a century later, Ackroyd brings her out of the shadows in his biography, *Dickens*, but he presents her as the embodiment of the idealised woman of Dickens' fiction. She emerges as the central figure, however, in Claire Tomalin's book, *The Invisible Woman : The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (1990). In Tomalin's text, she is allowed a life before Dickens, and her story does not stop with his death. Tomalin is the only biographer of the three who points to the difficulties of finding the truth about a subject who was forced to be voiceless. "Nelly Tells" is the
title of a chapter in *The Invisible Woman* (Tomalin, 1990: 228-243), in which her story is told, as much as possible, from Nelly's perspective. Tomalin's point is clear: even though efforts were made to diminish her importance in Dickens' life, later researchers are not bound to collude with her silencing.

Dickens first met Ternan, in 1857, when he was forty-six, and she was just eighteen. The relationship which developed was to last until his death in 1870. As Dickens established a number of households for her, and spent the last thirteen years of his life living with her, at least part of the time, it can be assumed that it was a relationship which influenced his life significantly. Since Dickens, and Ternan herself, took great care to avoid leaving any record of their relationship, it has been the subject of ongoing speculation. Ternan's story is an extreme example of the retrieval of a woman's life, even though her association with a celebrated writer was originally suppressed. The example is all the more striking because she was an intelligent, educated woman who might have supplied important biographical information about Dickens' emotional life and psychology. In a period when biography was considered a male preserve, it is also ironic that Ellen Ternan helped her
sister, Fanny, with a biographical project, even though she was complicit in obliterating her own part in the life of one of the most famous subjects of biography.

Earlier biographies which provide material for biographers sometimes have a fictional element which has become authorised. A relevant example, which Holmes cites, is Forster's life of Dickens (in Batchelor, J., ed. 1995: 18). Forster who, because of his long association with Dickens might be expected to be a useful authority, subscribes to the convention of Victorian hagiography in a sanitised version of Dickens' life: The Life of Charles Dickens, (circa 1872). Forster's authority has been undermined, however, as it has become increasingly obvious that he modified the facts of Dickens' life to protect his friend from the world's censure.

In relation to this, and to the metabiographical issue of authority, it is interesting to look at the discrepancies between Forster's life of Dickens and Ackroyd's Dickens, particularly in the part played by Ellen Ternan in Dickens' life. Ternan's part in Forster's narrative is reduced to oblique reference, in connection with Dickens' separation from his wife, to the
'miserable gossip' and 'false rumours' surrounding the circumstances. Forster touched very briefly on a "Personal" statement which Dickens, against the advice of his friends, insisted on publishing in his periodical, *Household Words* and, also briefly, on an illicitly published letter in which Dickens sought to defend himself against potential scandal (in Dent & Sons, eds.1969: 206). Ternan's name is not mentioned, and Forster simply includes Dickens' will as an appendix to the *Life*, allowing the implications of Dickens' bequest to Ellen Ternan to go unremarked (1969: 419). Neither does Forster mention her in the 'Author's Footnotes'. It is left to the editor of the Dent edition to provide extensive notes on the significance of Ellen Ternan in the separation of Dickens and his wife, and to Dickens' subsequent life (1969: 454-465). The editor's notes to *The Life of Charles Dickens* explain that "Forster's narrative makes brief and, at the time it was written, necessarily discreet references" to these events (1969: 454). Propriety demanded that Dickens' unconventional lifestyle was not openly acknowledged.

Dickens' letter attempting to justify his separation from his wife was given to the manager of his public readings, with
instructions to "show it to whomever might be interested" (D: 860). The manager took the course of having it published in a newspaper. Neither the "violated letter", as Dickens called it (D: 859), nor its blatant falsehoods, are discussed by Forster, apart from his somewhat coy reference to its publication, and an extremely oblique comment that thus he had not shrunk from "illustration of grave defects in Dickens' character" (in Dent & Sons, eds. 1969: 206). It is left to the imagination of the reader just what those 'grave defects' might be and, because of the ambiguity of the reference we cannot be sure, when reading the text, just how much the earliest authority on Dickens' life knew about Dickens' involvement with Ellen Ternan.

In his "Notes on texts and Sources", however, Ackroyd writes at length about the evidence that he has of the intersecting lives of Dickens, Ellen Ternan and Forster. He mentions Dickens' financial support of Ellen over a period of many years. This support, according to evidence presented by Ackroyd, extended to his establishment of a trust fund for Ellen (D: 1050) and clandestine housing arrangements which he made for her (D: 1054). Ackroyd refers to the public statement made by Dickens, and demonstrates the falsehoods in the 'violated
letter', about which Forster would have known. He also gives evidence that Forster was in Dickens' confidence concerning Ellen. Ackroyd refers to a letter that Dickens, while preparing for a trip to America in 1867, wrote to his friend, 'Wills' (D: 1062), in which he reminded Wills that Forster knew Nelly and would do anything for her that needed to be done. Dickens was making arrangements for Ellen's care while he was away though, it must be noted, he showed no similar concern about Ellen's mother who resided with her.

Forster's knowledge of the serious nature of the relationship is thus documented, but not included in his biography. He was bending the knee to Victorian propriety in his efforts to protect Dickens' public image, and in the characteristic Victorian fashion of dealing with irregular liaisons, did not openly acknowledge the situation. This biography by Forster, a close friend and confidant of his subject, omits what is arguably a significant influence in Dickens' life and work.

Ackroyd is ready to question the authority of this previous version of Dickens' biography, but there are grounds for
accusations that he, too, lacks objectivity though, again, this could be interpreted as being a form of allusion to Victorian hagiography. He is curiously evasive about the substantial bequest made by Dickens to Ellen Ternan, referring to it as obliquely as Forster had, over a century before: "It is [Forster] who prints Dickens' will in an appendix, but for a hint of notoriety surrounding that document it is interesting to read ... J.H. Friswell" (D: 1146). Ackroyd is apparently unwilling to pursue this line of enquiry himself, perhaps simulating the delicacy of Victorian biographers. The effect, of course, is to make readers question the curious gaps in Dickens' life story which represent Ellen Ternan.

Another notable feature of Ackroyd's summary treatment of the women in Dickens' life is related to his rationalisation of Dickens' behaviour towards the women closest to him. Ackroyd makes an argument that a peculiar quality of writers of genius is that they have difficulty separating reality from fiction. Dickens' imagination is so powerful, Ackroyd claims, that it intrudes on day-to-day reality. In his discussion on all Dickens' writings about his marriage separation, Ackroyd concedes that much of it was "quite untrue" (D: 856), and that,
in life, he "borrowed from his fiction (D : 857). Yet Ackroyd does not present very convincing alternative realities for Catherine or Ellen. Instead, he extrapolates upon the notion of Dickens' reality being borrowed from his fiction, to reach conclusions about the nature of the Dickens/Ternan relationship.

Ackroyd borrows the notion of the idealised Victorian woman, which pervades Dickens' fiction, to construct an imagined relationship between Dickens and Ellen Ternan. The effect is almost parodic, and is thus critically disarming with regard to Ackroyd's gender bias. Although he acknowledges that Dickens' interest in Ellen was intense and long-enduring, admitting that he had an ongoing obsession with her, there is a sense, too, of Ackroyd's advocacy when he insists that Dickens' love was idealised. He earnestly tells the reader that it is almost inconceivable that Dickens' and Ellen's relationship was consummated, since "purity and innocence are the two most important qualities for him" (D : 967). He explains his reason for this conclusion:
We might consider this at least as a hypothesis, therefore - all the evidence about Dickens' character, and all the evidence we possess about Ellen Ternan herself, suggest that the relationship between them acted for Dickens as the realisation of one of his most enduring fictional fantasies. (D: 967)

Ackroyd relies for his assessment of this situation, as for many other explanations of Dickens' behaviour, on a motif which pervades Dickens' fiction. The fantasies to which he refers are the idealised characterisations in his novels, of innocent and 'pure' young women.

In the case of 'fallen' women, Dickens characteristically includes scenes of redemption and Ackroyd draws on one such situation, from Dickens' fiction, to support his opinion that Dicken's and Ternan's relationship was technically innocent. Ackroyd likens the brother and sister relations of Rosa Bud and Edwin Drood, in Dickens' last novel, to that of Dickens and Ternan. He suggests that Dickens' words in Edwin Drood are a reflection of reality: "The relations between them ... became elevated into something more self-denying, honorable, affectionate, and true" (D: 1124). Ackroyd concedes that "we
cannot extrapolate the art to the life but there is a tone here that is quite new in Dickens' work, and it is hard to see from where else it might have come" (D: 1124). Leaving aside the logical inference, if one accepts this proposal, that the nature of the real as well as the fictional relationship might have changed, Ackroyd's statement is strikingly ambivalent about the reliability of deducing the life from the art.

Ackroyd's biography, then, stands in strong contrast to Forster's. Forster's absenting of Ellen Ternan from Dickens' biography, despite his close involvement in both of their lives, shows he is aware of the interpretation the public would put on their liaison. Ackroyd supplies many details of the secrecy surrounding Dickens' relationship with Ellen but, driven by his desire to present Dickens in the best possible light, he reduces Ellen Ternan to a faint copy of Dickens' fictional women. Thus Ackroyd is able to avoid acknowledging the wrong done by Dickens to Ternan, and to avoid viewing it from her perspective. She is thus represented in the colourless fashion of Dickens' idealised female creations and is as silenced as a doll.

In the 1992 Conference Papers, *Victorian Gothic*, Catherine
Waters writes an article entitled, "'The skeleton in my domestic closet': Dickens, Sensationalism and the politics of Privacy". In this she refers to the separation between public and private life, a feature of nineteenth-century ideology which was reproduced in the fictional narratives of the period. Waters also notes the concern of twentieth-century commentators

to establish the 'truth' of the circumstances involved, and, ... to note the ironic gap apparently opened up between Dickens the novelist and Dickens the husband and father. Such accounts unproblematically assume a distinction between narratives of 'truth' and fiction, and between private and public identities (96).

Waters shows that these distinctions are blurred, in Dickens' case, by referring to the 'personal' statement that he published which "relied upon a simultaneous construction and deconstruction of a distinction between public and private life" (1992: 97). The point that Waters makes is that Dickens' public writing about his marriage separation is an extraordinarily complex ideological mix "which draws its rhetorical power
from an emphasis upon the very boundary it transgresses" (1992: 97). Dickens' writing cannot be viewed, in any of its forms, as anything more than a construct. The narratives of 'truth' and fiction are merged, as Ackroyd claimed, but Waters finds no reason to believe that Dickens himself believed his fictions. He was simply using the best means at hand to protect the closest thing to his heart: his relationship with 'his' public.

In *Dickens*, Ackroyd discusses at length Dickens' statement to the public about the woes of his marriage. A public statement of this nature is strikingly lacking in delicacy, by any standards, and is even more inappropriate in the context of the nineteenth-century ideology of domestic privacy. Dickens' intention, however, was clearly to show the public that Catherine was not a 'normal' mother, and thus, to suggest that the break up of family life was her responsibility, not his, since she had failed in her womanly duties.

Ackroyd also refers to Dickens' description of the "virtuous and spotless creature ... innocent and pure, and as good as my own dear daughters", and assumed it referred to Georgina Hogarth (*D* : 860). Waters, however, claims that it refers to
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Ellen Ternan, and considers it to be a rhetorical device by Dickens to imply a father and daughter relationship between them (1992: 101). She writes: "The opposition between 'truth' and fiction is destabilised by the rhetoric of Dickens' public performance" (1992: 98). The point is that Dickens' public writing about his domestic situation appropriated domestic ideology in which the privacy of the domestic sphere is sacred.

Ackroyd is quick to admit that the untrue statements by Dickens about his wife were designed to retain the public's love and respect which was his central motivating force. However, logic seems to escape Ackroyd when he then makes the quantum leap that Dickens' fictions provide the evidence needed to ascertain the truth of Dickens' relationship with Ellen Ternan.

Ackroyd supplies detailed evidence about Ellen Ternan's movements, and comments made about her, over a period of years, by Dickens' contemporaries, but refuses to recognise the credentials of those who do not support his conclusions about her relationship with Dickens. He bypasses the evidence of Thackeray, a friend of Dickens, and dismisses remarks made by Dickens' own daughter. One case in point, relating to Dickens'
daughter, Kate, is a particularly cavalier disregard for her opinion. Information confided by Kate to a friend, and disclosed by Ackroyd, is that Kate told her friend, Gladys Storey, that "her father and Ellen had set up an establishment together and that there had been a resultant son (who died in infancy)" (D: 968).

Gladys Storey included the details in her biography, *Dickens and Daughter*. The comments, however, are dismissed by Ackroyd as "unsubstantiated remarks relayed at second hand (D: 968). It is interesting, moreover, to consider the connotations of his descriptive phrase for the biography: "Other details can be gleaned from the remarks of Kate Dickens as broadcast to the world (italics mine) by Gladys Storey in *Dickens and Daughter* (D: 1146). The implication is that Storey's gossip-mongering should be contrasted with Ackroyd's more responsible biography.

Ackroyd is comfortable about using this sort of evidence when it supports his case, so one wonders about his reasons for dismissing it in this instance. It is difficult to understand why he places no credence on Kate's authority. After all, she had little to gain by debunking her father's reputation. Perhaps, again, Ackroyd is simulating the writing of the period by
responding to nineteenth-century sanctions against public disclosure of domestic imbroglios. Or maybe he is simply intent on fitting the events into the pattern he has constructed of Dickens' personality. After presenting conflicting evidence about the Dickens/Ternan relationship, Ackroyd elides the evidence which does not fit his preferred interpretation of the situation. The truth of Ackroyd's biography seems to be tinged by an element of invention which undermines his self-promotion as an omniscient biographer.

Byatt makes a comment on Ackroyd's perfunctory portraits of Dickens' family and friends in her review, *Dickens and His Demons* (1991: 2). She claims that Ellen Ternan is not represented, by Ackroyd, as "a real woman with real problems" (1991: 2). Her criticism is that Dickens' construction is "out of focus" as a result of this omission, and that we are privy to the construction of a legend, rather than the life of a human being. By so writing, Byatt is drawing attention to the narrowness of Ackroyd's perspective, in not appreciating the very human problems which Ternan must have endured. The female perspective of a spokesperson for Ellen Ternan, however, represents her and Dickens in quite a different way.
Claire Tomalin offers a representation of Ellen Ternan more in line with Byatt's position on the issue of secondary female lives in biography. Her biography, *The Invisible Woman* (1990), was mentioned briefly in Chapter 1 in relation to its possible categorisation as literary biography, and it is an interesting representation of Ternan, strongly contrasting with that of Ackroyd. Claire Tomalin focusses on the strong personality of Ternan, explaining it as the reason for her long relationship with Dickens, and draws very different and rather more convincing conclusions from the 'evidence' remaining about her. Her argument, which fits very neatly with the facts, shows "there is an element of strain about the attempts to maintain that [Dickens'] relations with Nelly were not those of lover and mistress" (1990: 261). She uses Ackroyd's own weapon against him: recourse to Dickens' fiction, but sees it in relation to his anxiety about his public image: "What could he do with that great stereotype, the Fallen Woman, with a bad girl who was bad through his own fault and also beloved?" (1990: 265).

With exactly the same facts at her disposal, Tomalin is able to understand something that Ackroyd does not appear to have
considered: that Ternan's position was an unenviable one. Her life with Dickens, until his death, must have been a lonely, unfulfilling and humiliating one. In fact, Tomalin goes so far as to claim that she lost her very identity, and turned "herself into someone quite different" (1990: 267) from her natural personality, while in Dickens' shadow.

Reading the three versions of this relationship together, the representations of Ellen Ternan made by Forster, Ackroyd and Tomalin, provide a caution against relying on the weight of earlier 'authorities'. Tomalin is applauded by Worthen for being "a model of how to incorporate, not to hide, absence and ignorance" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 241). In The Invisible Woman, she presents a summary of the narrative which "tried to make some sense of the known facts" of the lost years of Ternan's life from 1861 to 1865 (1990: 147). She suggests
that Nelly became pregnant by Dickens and that to minimize the possibility of scandal he moved her to France ... that she had her baby there, with her mother in attendance, some time in 1863; that the baby died, probably in the summer of 1863; and that she then stayed on in France or spent most of her time abroad until 1865. *Some or all of this may be wrong* (1990: 148).

Worthen believes these concluding words should be added to all literary biographies "as a kind of Government Health Warning" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 242). Unlike Ackroyd, who adopts the stance of 'the biographical instinct' to explain the meaning of the events of Dickens' life, Tomalin resists resting on her laurels as a biographer. Disdaining authority herself, Tomalin also challenges the authority of the male contract in biography.

In *Telling Women's Lives*, Linda Wagner-Martin claims that

women's biography is mature enough now that its practitioners are willing to experiment and perhaps demand that conventions change so that they can narrate the stories they find interesting in voices that enable, enhance, or even challenge those narratives (1994: 166).
Tomalin's biography which, according to Wagner-Martin, "pushes the art of biography very near fiction" (1994: 162) is an experiment in biography which, like Ackroyd's, relies on a truth of interpretation perilously near a 'truth of fiction. But her experiment in bringing an 'invisible woman' to light is more persuasive than Ackroyd's because, as Wagner-Martin puts it, "she relies on her considerable ability to see the story from Nelly Ternan's point of view" (1994: 162). This, then, is the central argument for widening biography beyond the traditional male-authored life of a male subject.

Ackroyd's biography demonstrates the imbalance, or the sense of there being gaps, in a biography which omits the woman's voice. It is arguable that he anticipates critical reactions from those who, like Woolf in A Room of One's Own, wonder why the woman of personality and character "had no existence save in the fiction written by men ... [who] pervades poetry cover to cover [but] is all but absent from history" (1993: 40). Ackroyd, perhaps anticipating criticism, includes discussions of the complexities of Dickens' relationships with women within the main text, and in his "little essays" which
follow the main text ($D : 941$). It is a notable omission, however, that in Chapter 27, in which he gives detailed information about Dickens' separation from his wife, he makes no real attempt to empathise with Catherine, or to present the facts from her point of view.

A defence which might be argued for his omission of Catherine's perspective is that there is no written record of her experience, but Ackroyd tells us otherwise in the notes on Chapter 27. Here he mentions 'the famous Thomson-Stark Letter' from Catherine's aunt to a family friend. Ackroyd concedes that the letter has a large amount of verified material about the separation from Catherine's point of view ($D : 1191$). But Ackroyd fails to avail himself of this material, and his detailed factual account is curiously devoid of what is perhaps the most emotive aspect of the whole affair: the hurt and humiliation of his helpless wife.

An examination of *Dickens* and *Possession* highlights and leads to a greater understanding of the issues of gender in biography. Ackroyd does not address the problems of male authority, directly, in *Dickens* but his model serves as a
contrast with Byatt's presentation of the issue. It is time for the truth of Byatt's fiction to be told. The women's lives in the nineteenth century should be retrieved from behind the shadow cast on them. As Tomalin puts it, it is high time "to start putting something on paper which might restore Nelly to visibility" (1990: 268). As this chapter has demonstrated, this is important for the inherent interest in the way in which the women lived their lives, as well as for the more complete picture, thus provided, of the men with whom they were associated.

Ackroyd and Byatt together reveal the element of fictionality in the representation of women in nineteenth-century biography, and the changing perceptions about the biographer's authority with regard to women's representation which is evident in the twentieth century. Chapter 4 is concerned with the competing demands of textual conventions and the transmission of facts in the construction of the lives of biographical subjects, male or female. The intersection of the works of Byatt and Ackroyd demonstrate that the ordered lives, with which we are presented in conventional biographies, are an artistic illusion.
Chapter four

Textuality and fictionality in biography

The previous chapter was concerned with the praxis of Possession and Dickens with regard to the gap in nineteenth-century biography, caused by the marginalisation of women. A number of similarities and differences are apparent in the works of Ackroyd and Byatt and together they form a kind of dialectic on the issue. Read in conjunction, the two works also form a dialectic on the issue of biography's factual and literary nature. This chapter will show how Byatt and Ackroyd examine the gap between a life and a biographical representation of a life. Both writers are concerned with the problem of reconciling the facts of a subject's life with an image of that life. The two works, using different media, explore a contemporary theoretical issue faced by biographers, and demonstrate complementary positions on the debate.

Byatt and Ackroyd examine the effect of biographers imposing textual order on the random events of the subject's life. They expose the tension between what are, essentially,
the devices of fictional writing, and what purports to be factual material. Byatt's novel points to the absurdity of trying to equate a life with a coherent work of fiction, but Ackroyd's experiment expresses the desire to confront and analyse this problem. Byatt emphasises textual devices, in the form of a novel, to demonstrate how these techniques, when used by a biographer, can result in a contrived, rather than an actual, life of a subject. Ackroyd enacts the contemporary biographer's dilemma, caught between the Scylla of contemporary cognitive uncertainty, and the Charybdis of concession to public demand.

The attraction of biography, according to John Worthen, in "The Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer", is that

> difficult human lives can ... be summed up, known, comprehended: that ... a world will be created in which there are few or no unclear motives, muddled decisions, or ... loose ends.


It is expedient, Worthen argues, for biographers to contrive a narrative which conceals their inescapable ignorance, because the soothing quality of an inevitable development is rated very
highly by many readers.

Working in a sceptical critical climate, however, Byatt and Ackroyd destabilise the conclusive biography. Ackroyd's biography is experimental in its narrative structure, providing a dialectic within itself. The main body of the text sums up Dickens' idiosyncratic life, clarifies his motives and tidies up all the loose ends which the documentation of his life does not explain. This part of the structure of Dickens is an acknowledgement of the reader's need to understand human experience, and to find an ordered world within biography. But, balanced against this is an alternative strand which unsettles and deconstructs the 'well-made' biography. Byatt also offers a challenge to the comfortable view of a tidy, conclusive biography, insisting that narrative certainties in biography are illusory. Thus, her work serves as a devil's advocate for Ackroyd's experiment.

In Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form (1984), Nadel reaches back to Plutarch to show that, historically, there has been a continuous experiment with, and adaptation of, the biographical form. He identifies the eighteenth century, though, as a
significant age of pre-modern experiment, claiming that the emergence of the novel, in that era, was an important influence on biography (1984: 184). The nineteenth century, according to Nadel, re-established the 'serious' biography with evidence and historical 'fact' banks taking precedence over narrative method or interpretation (1984: 185).

In the twentieth century, however, biography has moved again towards an interaction with the novel, Nadel claims, and modernist interest in new forms of fictional expression are reflected in biographies that show an awareness of story (1984: 185). Moreover, Nadel writes, twentieth-century biography recognises the impossibility of unity, completeness of self, or historical cohesiveness, which is part of the understanding of our era (1984: 186).

Nadel cites Frank Kermode to explain why today's biographies reflect a belief in the power of fictions. As Kermode has written: "It is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos, but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for co-existence with it only by our fictive powers" (In Nadel, 1984: 186). Kermode claims that the growing use of fictions in our
era is in order to reconcile the disorder and illogicality in our lives. Nadel considers that frame of mind to have impacted on biography.

In *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions* (in Salwak ed. 1996), Martin Stannard links Ackroyd with this impetus in his essay, "The Necrophiliac Art?" He claims that the collapse of the realist novel in our 'postmodern' age has left a gap in the market which has been filled by biography. Ackroyd is one of the novelists, listed by Stannard, who

*turn increasingly to biography, experimenting with the form. Ackroyd's invented conversations with Dickens ... break from the convention of the biographer as objective historian to emphasize his role as enthusiast, fellow-traveller, and above all, as artist. The narrator in these books often takes on the function of the omniscient, intrusive narrator of realist fiction* (in Salwak ed. 1996: 33).

Stannard claims that Ackroyd uses the biography to fill the public need for the plain tale, authoritatively told, and views him as a kind of stalwart of realist fiction, 'fellow-traveller'
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with Dickens. Given the mimetic features of the biography, *Dickens*, it is a valid comment. Stannard’s comments, furthermore, take account of Ackroyd’s awareness of the late twentieth-century theoretical approach to the biographer as historian, and establishes his placement, as a novelist-turned-biographer, within the contemporary critical arena.

Ackroyd’s work shows the influence of many of the literary theories of his era. Mikhail Bakhtin’s insights on the importance and influence of novel form on literary genres has particular application to Ackroyd’s treatment of the biography genre in *Dickens*. Bakhtin’s writings on the novel, in one of four essays collected in *The Dialogic Imagination* (in Holquist ed. 1992), are useful to reach an understanding of Ackroyd’s rationale for the novelisation of his biography on Dickens.

Bakhtin writes of the effect of the dynamic novel form on the established literary genres in terms of ‘Carnival’. According to Bakhtin, the emphasis on Carnival, which is an essential feature of the novel, undermines the notion of literary works being organic unities, and promotes them as multi-levelled. In Carnival, everything serious, elevated and authoritative is
subverted and mocked. This concept is contrasted by Bakhtin with the legendary figures of epic, which are stabilised by their placement in the distant past. Bakhtin explains that "in ancient literature, it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse [and that] ... the tradition of the past is sacred" (1992: 15). The high genres of antiquity are idealised and have an official air of authority.

When the novel becomes the dominant genre, however, according to Bakhtin, "epistemology becomes the dominant discipline" (1992: 15). Unofficial thought and challenge replace authority and absolute knowledge. The valorised figures of the past are reduced by aspects of novelisation, such as flexibility or humour, to the more familiar plane of contemporary life. The author, too, accepts a less dominant position under these conditions, even to the point of applying self-parody, with regard to his or her own limitations.

It might be argued, with reference to Bakhtin, that Ackroyd, aware of the biographer's propensity to make a legend of his subject, self-consciously applies novelistic devices to his representation of Dickens, to almost parodic effect. Interwoven
into the authoritative voice of the biographer representing his subject as a legend is a slightly mocking undercurrent which lays bare the construction of a legend. That is, he 'carnivalises' the previously authorised figure of Dickens. In this way, Ackroyd simultaneously satisfies the contemporary public need, identified by Stannard, Nadel and Kermode, for a seemingly complete and unified life, while "doffing his hat" to the prevailing thought of the contemporary critical establishment. Ackroyd tries to integrate the epic nature of the figure of Dickens with the metabiographical element, in which he adopts the position of author-in-biography, evaluating his own and past representations of his subject. Byatt writes in her review of *Dickens*, in *The Washington Book World*, that Ackroyd's enactment and description of the construction of a legend is at the expense of the human being (1991: 2). While this might be fair criticism, Ackroyd's work, nevertheless, is an effective critique on the current dilemma of textuality and fictionality in biography.

In his biography of Dickens, Ackroyd critiques the issue of textuality in biography, as he plays at destabilising narrative coherence, only to re-assert it, thus laying bare his
metabiographical intent. The structure of *Dickens* is complex, but the main text's cyclic design effects a sense of the completion and coherence of Dickens' life. It begins with a prologue in which can be discerned the beginnings of the textual threads which bind the biography into a carefully woven fabric. It ends with a postscript in which the threads are tied up. The prologue serves to introduce the motivating forces of Dickens' life, and establishes the beginning of the cause and effect pattern which underlies the design of the book. The prologue also explains the methods used by the biographer to understand his subject, and makes a statement about the type of biography to follow. The structure of the coherent, definitive text is introduced, yet an underlying strain is also felt, when the prologue introduces the challenge of the biographer. He or she must try to make biography "an agent of real knowledge" (*D*: xvi).

The metaphor of a textile is a useful way to describe the textual construction of *Dickens*, which is influenced by the novel. One of the threads woven through the book begins with Dickens' infant experience and perceptions and the way these elements drive his view of the world. While this is not an unusual opening premise in a biography, as Chapter 2 explains,
Ackroyd uses Dickens' infantile experience as a powerful, unifying thread in the design of the biography. The influence of Dickens' parents, especially his father, is signalled by the reference, in the first paragraph of the prologue, to his lifelong striving to fulfil the ambition which was originally planted in him by his father. Dickens is first presented to the reader, on what served as his deathbed, in the house his father had recommended as a worthy aspiration for his young son. As Ackroyd says, "so great was his father's hold upon his life that, forty years later, he had bought it" (D : xi). This strong opening assertion by Ackroyd, that Dickens' motivations might be understood in terms of his father, is a thread which binds the biography. The thread is tied in the postscript, which returns to Dickens' deathbed, surrounded by his family, and which ends with preparations for the sale of the house, Gad's Hill Place. There is a sense of tidy closure in combining the death of Charles Dickens and the sale of Gad's Hill in the postscript.

To support this causal structure, Ackroyd weaves into the biography the thread of psychological analysis which informs his view of the father as the motivating force of Dickens' life. He uses this method to help create a meaningful portrait of
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Dickens' life which might, otherwise, be a random chronology of actions which do not add up to a particularly coherent figure. In the prologue, Ackroyd uses the imagery of the sea as a metaphor for this biographical method. Metaphor is, of course, an effective fictional technique, a way of offering powerful suggestions to the reader. The imagery suggests he will go deeper than the surface features of his subject's life, and "dive into unfathomable depths" of Dickens' unconscious (D: xvi). The reader learns, during the course of the text, to ignore the biographer's modest disclaimer that what has "drifted down [is] flattened beyond recognition" (D : xvi). Ackroyd interprets the "lost objects which have floated down" (D : xvi) by employing psychology to explain Dickens' behaviour. Consistently and confidently, throughout the biography, Ackroyd claims that Dickens' actions are unconsciously related to infantile experiences with his father. It is a unifying textual expedient.

In his essay "The Necessary Ignorance of a Biographer", John Worthen scathingly describes "a recipe for the worst kind of biography": that which is written for the biographer's convenience, "a final ordering" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 234). This type of biography is a misguided attempt, according to
Worthen, to make a hybrid collection of letters, facts, diaries and household documents fit a formal design. From the vantage point of hindsight the biographer imposes order on the facts and gives the illusion of distilling the 'essence' of her/his subject's life. This kind of biographical opportunism has more to do with artistic coherence, Worthen claims, and less to do with illuminating the essential nature of the subject which a biographer of integrity seeks to do.

Worthen discusses Ackroyd's introduction as an example of a biographer suggesting "a vision of a life" seen at its final point (in Batchelor ed. 1990: 235). He might be referring directly to Ackroyd when he insists that this kind of biography, an "apparently seamless and omniscient narrative is, however, constructed out of a random survival of relationships that can be known about" (in Batchelor ed. 1990: 232). Ackroyd speaks of "the need to make the narrative coherent" (D: 946), admitting that "at all costs I wanted to keep up the momentum and the smooth texture of the prose" (D: 943). This he achieves, but the cost, as Worthen sees it, is to miss the essential Dickens. But although it invites criticism, which Ackroyd admits he takes "too seriously" (D: 941), it also opens his work to speculation.
about the genre of biography, and this, after all, would appear to be one of the purposes of Ackroyd's experiment.

Another textual device which Ackroyd employs in his examination of the fictionalising of biography might be read as postmodernist pastiche. In Chapter 3, I introduced the term 'pastiche' in relation to Byatt's work, and later in this chapter, I will discuss its use in Possession in more detail. But in Ackroyd's work, pastiche has a humorous effect, and serves to highlight the fictionality of his biography, particularly with regard to the construction of a legendary Dickens.

Pastiche is a composition made up of bits of other works which may be genuine, or may imitate other styles. Ackroyd's biography is mimetic of Dickens' fiction in structure and style, as well as in other elements I have discussed relating to conventions of Victorian literature and biography. The shape of the biography, Dickens, follows a pattern similar to that of Dickens' art. According to Ackroyd, the moment of Dickens' death has been foreshadowed, again and again, in his fiction. He explains that the connection made between death and infancy in Dickens' fiction is reflective of an attitude which haunted him
in real life: "Sleep, repose, death, infancy, innocence, oblivion are the words that formed a circle for him, bringing him back to the place from which he had begun" (D: xii). Ackroyd shapes the biography to simulate this view of life, which he claims was held by Dickens, and reflected in his fiction. His biography is cyclic in form, starting with, and bringing Dickens back to Gad's Hill Place where, Ackroyd argues, Dickens' true life began and its course was first determined. The postscript returns to Dickens' deathbed after the chronological life has unfolded. Thus Ackroyd imposes a shape on the events of Dickens' life in the same way as Dickens shapes his own fictions. Ackroyd's deathbed scene, complete with gathered family, moreover, is typical of Dickens' own fictions, which characteristically have bathetic scenes of mourning family members gathered around a deathbed.

Within Ackroyd's description of this scene, though, there is an element of Carnival. The lying-in-state of the subject is highly stylised, emphasised by its position at the opening and the closure of the biography, bathed in light, and surrounded by his loving family. There is, however, a clearly discernible satirical tone which subverts the drama and sense of high
occasion associated with the death of a public figure. In this way, Ackroyd signals the influence of the novel on his representation of Dickens and foregrounds the fictional elements which shape it. The techniques he uses also imply a questioning of the role of the author in biography.

The prologue demonstrates, directly and indirectly, Ackroyd's assumption of authority to transmit this remarkably predictable, and coherent life against all the difficulties which face a biographer of a subject who has long been dead. The hidden aspects of Dickens' life are symbolised by the death mask which was placed on Dickens in accordance with the custom of the Victorian period. Against this symbol of concealment, Ackroyd sets light imagery: "the bright sunshine streamed in, glittering on the large mirrors around the room" (D: xi). A possible meaning which can be derived from this imagery is that Ackroyd, as a biographer, will be able to see beyond the mask, illuminating the life of Dickens by means of the biographical methods he will employ. One of these, arguably, is the mirroring effect of the lives of the people who were close to Dickens. His family is mentioned in the framing prologue and postscript, including a mention of his wife,
Catherine, separated from him for many years. There is a reflection of Dickens' life, the imagery suggests, in the lives of these people who knew him so well. It is not difficult to see, in this structural device, the allusion to one of Dickens' icons: the family as the location of stable identity.

As Ackroyd reveals in his work, however, Dickens' domestic life was a far cry from his idealised representations of it in many of his novels. Moreover, as Ackroyd himself avers, Dickens had a remarkable duality of identity. Significantly, Ellen Ternan is omitted from the prologue and postscript. She is mentioned, without comment, in the brief sentence in the chapter which precedes the postscript: "Ellen Ternan, summoned by Georgina, came that afternoon to be present at the side of the dying man" ($D : 1140$). In a manner, highly reminiscent of Forster's 'indications', Ackroyd makes a highly charged statement and leaves it to the readers to make of it what they will. It is clear that the important reflection of Dickens' life will not be seen, in this biography, in the life of the woman with whom he spent so much of his time. A probable reason for her omission from the narrative frame is that she simply does not fit comfortably into the production of a legend.
Another hypothesis is that she does not fit Dickens' fictional model. Ellen is far too disreputable a figure, it seems, to be incorporated into the stereotypical deathbed scene, conducted in the bosom of the nineteenth-century family.

Set against the careful structuring of the biography which caters for the public need for coherence, Ackroyd draws the reader's attention to the fact that this biography is not the definitive life of Dickens. This is the life of realist narrative organisation. Ackroyd reveals his fiction that order can be detected or created in the confusion of life. It might be inferred that the untidiness of Dickens' experience, resolved in a neat closure, is the work of the novelist, as much as the biographer. Ackroyd takes up the challenge "to make biography an agent of real knowledge" (*D* : xvi), but emphasises that the objective facts at his disposal are subject to the mediating and transforming effect of artificial narrative patterning.

The placement of interludes at intervals within the chronological biography of Dickens is another method whereby Ackroyd injects the element of Carnival into the work, and establishes competing voices which unsettle the assumption of
authority. These fictional interludes foreground a number of issues of biography, demonstrating the kinds of strains that are put upon it in the twentieth-century theoretical environment. The novelisation of biography is enacted and commented upon by Ackroyd in this way.

Interlude 1V (D : 646-649) is of particular interest, as it reveals the workings of Carnival on the biography. An assorted collection of Dickens' fictional characters make their way to a fair, and interact in a variety of symbolic ways. An actor, comically impersonating an eighteenth-century lawyer, suggests the undermining of authority and a mocking of the law. Little Nell, lying upon her bier in an exhibition, is seen by Jo to wink at Miss Havisham. The gesture subverts the serious, dramatic representation of Little Nell, captured in all her innocence, as well as the tragic and tortured Miss Havisham as she has become immortalised. It is a dynamic image, which suggests the possibilities of characters escaping from their assigned roles. Then a dwarf puts Miss Skewton's hat on his head. Time-honoured ways of perceiving characters are unsettled, the device thereby drawing attention to the way in which representation of character in biography may be similarly
liberated. As Bakhtin puts it, in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

*Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it* (1992: 23).

Bakhtin claims that familiarisation is necessary for "knowable and artistically realistic creativity" (1992: 23), and distinguishes familiarity from the serious and static representation of valorised figures of the distant past. The novelistic spirit inserts the element of comedy into serious literary representation, as Interlude 1V demonstrates.

Ackroyd deals with critical issues in a light, comedic way, making a very readable biography, even as he acknowledges the use of ordering techniques which undermine the veracity of his work. The biography is exposed by Ackroyd, in Interlude 1V, as "the handiwork of some secret fair-master" (*D*: 648). When a fictional contest between Pip and David Copperfield takes place, however, it has "no certain winner" (*D*: 648). It is, arguably, an acknowledgement by Ackroyd that, despite his
claims to see Dickens most clearly through his two 'autobiographical' characters, there are two separate voices, and thus, two different ways of seeing. In the fictional interaction between Pip and David Copperfield, Ackroyd allows a glimpse of the doubt that troubles his own assurance in reading Dickens’ character from the novelist's own fictions.

Ackroyd subverts his own authority with regard to other issues of biography in his allusions to Dickens' fictional characters, and to other well-known literary figures, in a 'pantomime' scene in Interlude 1V. The Gradgrind family play musical instruments, substituting play and art for the facts for which they have been remembered. Columbine and Harlequin tell the old tender stories "as if they were truly real" (D: 648). Not all is as it seems, Ackroyd implies, when Little Nell discloses that she had always wanted to be a dancer. We can not assume to know all the secrets of the human mind. The Squeers, keeping several boys up in the air at once, disclose the difficulties of juggling. It might be read as a metaphor for Ackroyd’s difficulties in meeting all the demands of his audience: the reading public and the critical establishment. It is also a metaphor for his attempts to juggle a belief in the
biographer's role and an understanding of its problems. The biography must seem to be definitive, even though the biographer himself realises the impossibility of it being so.

In the final stages of the interlude, Ackroyd lets us in on a textual device of the novelist/biographer. When the sky darkened and mist rolled in from the Thames, we are told by Scrooge that atmospheric change is quite common as "a prelude to some change in the narrative" (D:649). Ackroyd self-consciously signals an important structural division in the biography, which is designed to coincide with a period of distress and change in Dickens' life. Significantly, though, Ackroyd re-establishes control of the narrative, and re-affirms the biographer's position of authority. After Pickwick asserts: "We can go on ... We cannot die" (D:649), the biography resumes its traditional course in Chapter 21. The interlude has had the effect of deconstructing the biography, but now the work must continue with the certainty that, Ackroyd asserts, is demanded by the genre.

Ackroyd admits, in the 'interview' interlude, to "assuming more authority than in fact [I] possess" (D:942). He also
concedes that he may have "made too much of the fact ... that Dickens saw reality as a reflection of his own fiction" (D: 944). He claims that his examining the characters of Dickens' fiction is another way of his understanding the writer's character, but confesses that "sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't" (D: 942). That is, he makes his uncertainties known to the audience. By recourse to Dickens' fictional characters, Ackroyd draws attention to the construction of a coherent identity, even though, in reality, he is faced by a man who had a deeply divided and contradictory personality, according to all evidence. Ackroyd comprehends much of Dickens' behaviour, not explainable in ordinary terms, by recourse to Dickens' fiction but, in the 'fair' interlude, he comically demonstrates the dangers of this course. The important thing, for Ackroyd, is to examine the art of shaping facts into a textual design, even though that shaping might affect the validity of the portrait.

Another issue of biography of interest to Ackroyd is addressed by the use of fictional techniques, as well as discursive passages in the biography. It is related to the self-reflexive elements of biography which problematise its objective nature. His tone is faintly self-mocking as he
speculates on his immersion in his subject's life. A biography of insight is reliant on a dialogue being established between the biographer and his or her subject, but over-identification may result in a biography which bears the imprint of the biographical subject's themes and style. Ackroyd's interest in this notion is developed in his novel, *Chatterton* (1987), in which a twentieth-century, would-be poet is 'possessed' by the eighteenth-century poet, Thomas Chatterton. In *Dickens*, Ackroyd indicates his consciousness that he, too, became affected by his total immersion in Dickens' work and life. This is evident in his defence, at times, of Dickens' outrageous behaviour, when he suggests that it is an effect of Dickens' over-lively imagination. He implies that the same standards of honesty and integrity cannot be expected of the artistic temperament, an attitude which is questionable. It suggests that he is blinded by his admiration of Dickens' talent. In this respect, Ackroyd could be accused of over-identification with his subject.

There is, however, a striking degree of stylistic imitation in *Dickens*, which is a deliberately cultivated technique, used by Ackroyd, to examine the issue of identification in biography. I
have discussed how narrative patterning and motifs in the biography have resonances of Dickens' prose. In addition, there is a sustained mimesis at the very level of language. One particular technique is the use of fragmentary sentences for dramatic effect. When writing about *Sleake House*, for instance, Ackroyd interweaves summaries of incidents from Dickens' fiction with his own narrative, and a striking stylistic similarity is evident:

*Lady Dedlock lies dead before the iron gates of the burial ground.* The dead bodies of the poor. The dead bodies of the rich. Interconnectedness. The East wind ... *Krook writing words in chalk upon the wall, writing the words backwards, writing words which he does not understand* ... The poor. the outcast. The excluded ... Everything is touching else, so that it becomes impossible to know where the reality ends and the vision begins (*D*: 676).

The same could be said for some passages from Ackroyd's text: where does reality end and the vision begin? It is difficult to know, at times, if "this is the Victorian period, as it truly was", as Ackroyd repeats (*D*: 652), or whether this example of
pastiche is designed to emphasise the theoretical issue of identification in biography.

The second interlude (D: 323-325) is a dramatisation of Dickens interacting with some fictional characters and, presumably, with the biographer himself, in a Victorian London of Ackroyd's creation. As he walks with Dickens, and converses with him, the reader is invited to consider the implications of such an imaginative involvement with a long-dead subject. Ackroyd borrows heavily from Dickens' fiction and style in a segment which foregrounds the inclination of the biographer to use novelistic techniques, and particularly those used by the subject he so admires. The content of the passage is another example of the carnivalisation of the biography:

"What a shocking bad hat!" Then he laughed again. "Nothing like a street child to see the comedy of life ... Yes, a child," he went on. "No home should be without one. Excellent in novels too." And I could have sworn that, when he turned towards me, he actually winked - a brief funny wink - although it might have been a trick of the waning light (D: 325).
We hear the ghost of 'Trabb's boy' from *Great Expectations*, and Dickens himself as imagined by Ackroyd, Dickens' ghost writer. Moreover, the 'biographer' as an authoritative and reputable figure is mocked by his own creation or, at least, his simulacrum. Ackroyd later said to Melvin Bragg, in the documentary film, *Dickens*, that creating or writing about the subject is "like creating a character in a novel"(D: 945). In Interlude 11, Ackroyd implies that his vision of Dickens is imaginative and the biographer is prone to fictionalise his subject, but he follows the interlude with a brisk resumption of the matter-of-fact chronology of Dickens' life. There is a sense that, having dispensed with "the 'critical' material, which I always feel obliged to include even though it is precisely the kind of passage most readers will skip" (D: 941), Ackroyd is now free to get on with the biography that people will want to read.

Ackroyd is conscious of the central issues of the twentieth-century Poetics of biography, related to the modernist movement and its evolved descendant, postmodernism, which undermines tidy narratives in biography. Being aware of the literary/historical implications of these
movements, Ackroyd reflects this in the conflict he creates between a fictional element in his biography, and its claims to transmit real knowledge about its subject. He resolves this tension by privileging narrative coherence and continuity over discontinuities and gaps in the chronological details that are available about Dickens' life. Where there are uncertainties, Ackroyd hesitates, but finally asserts his authority. Although he includes liberating voices in his biography, which mock and challenge the genre, Ackroyd asserts that biography must maintain the illusion that a life is like a neatly packaged, coherent narrative, to cater for the public taste.

Byatt and Ackroyd deal with similar issues in their critiques of textuality in biography and, as I will demonstrate, their works both acknowledge the use of fictional devices in biography. Byatt, however, gives an unequivocal demonstration that a life cannot be accurately represented in a coherent work of fiction. In order to deal with the issues of textuality and its relationship with biography, Byatt chooses the medium of fiction, and aligns herself with the postmodernist rubric of critiquing unifying and controlling narratives.
In *Possession*, Byatt plays with the counter claims of the realist and the contemporary novel to examine the concept of fictionality in the novel, and also in biography. Paradoxically, by writing metabiography in the fictional form of the novel, she is able to draw attention to the issues of textuality and fictionality in biography. Her representations of the contemporary and the historical world are equally realist in style, but she foregrounds the fictionality of the novel by means of postmodernist techniques. These devices unsettle the establishment of order which realist techniques effect. They also trouble the reader's imaginative response, which the realist author seeks, to the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Byatt draws attention to the way in which an author constructs a narrative in order to give the illusion of reality or truth. In *Passions of the Mind*, Byatt refers to "a novel kind of acute disorder and discomfort in the reading experience" with regard to the literary factitiousness of the contemporary novel (1993: 169). This is the effect of *Possession*. As the embedded narrative in *Possession* is an historical world, Byatt also sets up questions about the fictional quality of representations of real historical figures. This has obvious implications for biography.
The issue of cognitive certainty is central to the modernist and the postmodernist movements, but the questions which are foregrounded differ. In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), McHale begins his 'descriptive Poetics' of the postmodernist movement by differentiating the 'dominant' in modernist and postmodernist fiction. The dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*; the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*. Modernist fiction uses strategies which foreground the types of questions which follow:

> How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? ... What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? ... What are the limits of the knowable? (McHale, 1987: 9)

Ackroyd foregrounds epistemological themes, such as the difficulty of accessing knowledge and the limits of knowledge. In this way he signals his metabiographical intent of examining issues of cognitive certainty which impact so strongly on the reading and writing of biography. He prefaces his biography with the challenge that he has set himself: to find, in all the
details he can gather, "the figure of the moving age" (D: xvi). But he acknowledges the difficulties which are inherent in this task: "When we observe his life and his work in continuous motion, will these biographical certainties remain or will they dissolve?" (D: xv). The opening statement of intent in this biography, then, is a strong indication of its dominant mode; the reader is informed that the problematic issues of biography will be addressed, such as just how much we can really know about the life and times of this subject, and whether this information will be illuminative of our own lives. The challenge in writing this biography, Ackroyd states, is to examine whether this can be done.

But, although Ackroyd foregrounds these types of questions in Dickens, and maintains the aspect, in his biography, of conducting an objective experiment, he shows an awareness of the ontological questions asked by postmodernist writers, and their relationship to theoretical issues of biography. For example, he acknowledges, in the documentary film version of the biography (1991), that he found himself "adrift between two worlds which had become one world". In addition, in Dickens, he states: "There are times, when looking at Dickens ... we are
looking at ourselves" (D : xv). Thus he acknowledges the self-reflexive issue in biography. Moreover, the mimetic element in Ackroyd's biography implies profound identification with his subject. It is here that Ackroyd's biography moves towards the boundary, if there is one, between modernist and postmodernist writing. He moves into an ontological mode and, in this way, he signals his awareness of the debate between the modernist and the postmodernist movements. When a writer highlights self-reflexive issues he is, according to McHale, moving from "problems of knowing to problems of modes of being " (1987:10). This seems to bear the influence of Vladimir Nabokov, cited in the epigraph of Dickens, because, as McHale puts it, Nabokov's writing career traces the crossover from modernist to postmodernist writing" (1987:18).

Following such gestures towards the postmodernist movement, and its destabilising effect on biography, however, Ackroyd's characteristic method is to re-assert the epistemological mode. For example, in the last paragraph of the Prologue, in what constitutes a summary of his discussion of this issue, he asserts that the biographer's project is to transmit "real knowledge" (D : xvi). This, I would argue,
supports my hypothesis, established earlier in this chapter, that the mimetic element in *Dickens* is Ackroyd's method of theorising about the issue of identification. I would argue, then, that Ackroyd establishes a theoretical position that the epistemological dominant is more compatible with the claims of objectivity which underlie the biographer's authoritative position.

Byatt's work, in contrast with that of Ackroyd, is firmly placed in the postmodernist mode, since it emphasises questions of ontology. Ontological questions which are foregrounded in postmodernist writing include: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" McHale cites Higgins' use of the term *post-cognitive* to describe these types of questions (1987:10). Other post-cognitive questions asked by McHale include:
What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence in a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? ... And so on. " (1987:10)

Post-cognitive questions, such as these, unsettle our previously-held concepts of existence. Our convictions about our identity, about our place in linear time, our agency, and our whole grasp on reality, in fact, become problematic. The narrative which foregrounds such questions will obviously not aim to create the illusion of such finite realities. Byatt's work contains these kinds of questions, so her work is firmly situated in the postmodernist mode.

Byatt uses a variety of motifs and devices, characteristic of the postmodernist movement to highlight the fictionality of the novel and biography. Her work is thus metafictional and, more relevantly in terms of my argument, metabiographical. By implication, the fictionality of biography, as well as fiction, is worthy of scrutiny. Possession foregrounds the type of post-
cognitive questions, listed above, as a way of doing this. This has the effect of challenging the ability of the biographer to make biography, any more than the novel, an agent of real knowledge.

Characteristically, postmodernist fiction foregrounds the way in which fictional objects and events are constructed and deconstructed in a literary text. The foregrounding of writing as a construct occurs consistently throughout the novel, *Possession*. At the surface level of the novel, our attention is drawn to the writing process when we observe texts-in-construction. Two examples of this are the correspondence between the Victorian poets, and Ellen Ash's journal. Secondly, when the documents are juxtaposed with omniscient narration, the gap is revealed between experience and emotions, as well as between these elements and what is actually written and shaped. This narrative structure points to the dangers of assuming complete understanding of the mode of existence of past lives from the documentary evidence left behind. Finally, our attention is drawn to issues of textuality by means of the scholars' speculations on these issues.
For example, at the beginning of his search for Ash's correspondent, who, if found, might cast light on Ash's life and poetry, Roland transcribes a passage by Crabb Robinson which makes reference to the first meeting between Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The use of Crabb Robinson, a real person in the world of fictional poets, blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. This postmodernist device, used in the early stages of the novel, creates a sense of discomfort in the readers in distinguishing which characters are fictional. There is preliminary confusion about whether the poet, Ash, actually lived in the Victorian period. Then Crabb Robinson, a person who lived in fact, is introduced into the narrative at the same time as the discovery of another fictional woman who, perhaps, was important in Ash's life. These uncertainties remind us of the myths which grow around the literary figures of the past, and also the fictions which so often surround the 'dark ladies' of writers' lives.

In copying notes from Crabb Robinson's diary, which might shed light on this woman, Roland speculates on the inaccuracies that plague research scholars. He finds his transcription of Crabb Robinson's diary "less confident, less
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homogeneously part of a life" (P: 25). He admits to himself that, statistically, he has almost certainly corrupted the source he is copying. This description of Roland's research experience draws the reader's attention, at the outset of the narrative, to the problems of reliability which beset biographers, particularly regarding the artifice of writing. Thus, the beginning of the narrative points to the fallibility of the writers upon whom the biographer relies for 'facts'. Ignorance, errors, omissions, substitutions, misinterpretations and embellishments all play their part in reducing the historical accuracy or factual basis of biography.

The novel opens with cognitive questions which are raised by the discovery of a letter drafted by Ash. At the level of the typography, there are erasures which make explicit to the reader the importance, to Ash, of this letter. The letter reveals that Ash modified his impetuous outpourings which might have seemed personal and intimate to the diffident and retiring LaMotte. His careful editing and rewriting of the letter indicates how important it was to him that the letter made the right impression on the recipient. At the level of narrative, the effect is to raise readers' speculations about whether there
were subsequent letters. Did the poet have a secret life? If this were discovered, how would this impact on the way his work was read? The other effect of the letter is to emphasise that Roland's view of Ash was mistaken; he did not really understand his mode of existence. There is an intensity of emotion in the letter which is totally at odds with what Roland knew about Ash, "a quiet and exemplary" man who was believed to have lived a peaceable private existence \((P:8)\). The letter is a paradigm for the biographical process. It demonstrates the constructed nature of sources, the fact that, when writing, a person adjusts what he or she has to say in deference to the recipient. It also shows that the biographer, or reader of the sources, has to use judgement when interpreting them.

Ellen Ash's journal is another interesting construction by which Byatt foregrounds the fictional element of all texts. In Chapter 3, I discussed how the narrative passages, juxtaposed with the journal entries, reveal Ellen's inner consciousness. This has the effect of deconstructing the journal. The fictional scholars, and also the readers of the work, realise that women's journals of the period should not be taken at face value. The middle class women who wrote them were, arguably,
constructing themselves in a way which accorded with the received view of what a woman's mode of existence should be.

The process of the young scholars' search and interpretation of the correspondence, the journal, and other documents, might be seen as an allegorical narrative about biography. The allegory illuminates the process of biography, and the relationship of the modes of existence of the investigated lives, with the biographer's own mode of being. The composition of the novel is a segmented structure of documents, together with segments of omniscient narration and comments on textuality and subjectivity made by the twentieth-century protagonists. In this way, Byatt duplicates the young scholars' difficulties as they struggle to understand and repossess a sense of identity and place in their own world, by observing a world other than their own.

The complexities of narrative structure, used by Byatt in Possession, create a sense of disorder and discontinuity within the text, thus undermining the security that ordered narratives offer. The overriding narrative of Possession is the quest formula, which at first glance is a predictable and tidy
narrative structure into which the 'romance' elements fit very comfortably. The two twentieth-century scholars, Roland and Maud, set out to establish the facts of the lost period in the life of the Victorian poet, Christabel LaMotte. They hope to find the truth about a child who possibly resulted from a romantic liaison with her contemporary, Randolph Henry Ash. Within the narrative of this twentieth-century quest, she embeds another, a narrative set in the Victorian period, which tells the whole story which the scholars are seeking.

In both narratives she creates a simulacrum of unpredictable, chaotic real life. She then establishes fictional order in the twentieth-century strand, using a detective genre closure in which good triumphs over evil. This false closure is then undercut by another in the romance genre. This is then subverted, in turn, by a final twist in the "Postscript" (P: 508). By the device of first fulfilling reader expectations, and then reversing them, Byatt emphasises the textual features of the narrative.

The parallel Victorian narrative is left unresolved, at least in the nineteenth-century tradition of closure. The story
sought, by the scholars about the Victorian poets, is not fully revealed to those seeking it in the twentieth century. Thus, even though the biographies about the Victorians will be rewritten, they will not be definitive. By refusing to fulfil the nineteenth-century romance conventions, Byatt again draws attention to the artificiality of adopting the narrative devices of fiction for biographies, and she also points to the elusive and incomplete nature of biographical truth.

This structure is in striking contrast with the conclusion engineered by Ackroyd. When he gathers Dickens' family around his deathbed at the end of the biography, the device is coloured with a degree of facetiousness but, nevertheless, it implies that this is the definitive ending of the whole story about Dickens. Possession implies something very different. The anticipated romantic closure in the Victorian tradition, a happy marriage with promise of a large and happy family, is denied us by Byatt. Ash and LaMotte do not achieve a reconciliation. He is resigned to a life full of sad secrets and, posing as the spinster aunt of her child, Maia, LaMotte lives out the rest of her life as the dependent relative in the household of her sister. Narrative expectations of the realist Victorian plot are thwarted by
Byatt's postmodernist structures.

The contemporary quest, however, does have a romantic closure. Her cynical, post-modern characters, Maud and Roland, reach a romantic understanding in a reversal which draws reader attention to the contrivance of the traditional closure. The high quest modulates temporarily into its vulgar cousins; gothic and detective strands make their appearance and the generic expectations which they set up are fulfilled. The vampire-like Cropper is exposed and disempowered. The apparent conclusion, although riotously parodic, is true to the conventions of the detective genre, demystifying the gathered cast of characters and the readers, and discrediting the villain.

At this point, the narrative continues in the vein of romance, but it is stylised to the point of parody. Maud and Roland reach an understanding, there is talk of marriage, and the imagery of the last paragraph of this narrative strand points to order after disorder, and the promise of new life. The morning after the storm "smelled fresh and lively and hopeful" \(P: 507\). Roland has taken 'possession' of the previously impregnable Maud, promising to "take care of her" \(P: 507\), and
their sterile lives become full of hope. The traditional quest narrative is unsettled, however, and the sense of narrative security undermined in Possession, because the parodic intention is unmistakable, and because Roland and Maud are such an unlikely couple.

The reader then discovers that this is a false ending. Byatt adds another conclusion, and this is how we know that the quest was not fully successful. In the 'postscript', a coda to the main narrative, readers are made privy to the information denied the protagonists: that Ash had traced LaMotte to her hiding place in her sister's household, and had met his daughter. The coda is written in the fairy-tale style of LaMotte, but she does not tell the story. The objective point of view of the coda creates a matter-of-fact tone:

There was a child, swinging on a gate, wearing a butcher-blue dress and a white pinafore, humming to herself and making a daisy chain.

There was a man, tall, bearded, his face in shadow under a wide-brimmed hat, a wanderer coming up the lane, between high hedges, with an ashplant in his hand and the look of a walker (P: 508).
We know them to be Randolph Ash, and Maia, LaMotte’s and Ash’s daughter. The man puts a lock of Maia’s hair into his watch, and gives her a message to pass on to her 'aunt'. Although Maia is named for the mythical goddess, Maia the messenger, this message is never delivered. So we learn that Ash knew of the existence, and happiness of his child, and was content to leave them in peace.

The postscript has the effect of emphasising biographical gaps and creating uncertainty; in a 'last word' by Byatt, we are warned to be wary of complacency with regard to biographical omniscience. The embedded, Victorian narrative is the story that the research scholars are seeking. It might be seen as the biographical narrative which has been constructed from the newly discovered documents. But the end frame of the primary diegetic narrative, set in the twentieth-century world, is dropped and the novel concludes with the Victorian narrative in the postscript. This courts confusion over which narrative is 'reality'.

Further questions about the reality of a biographical
narrative concern the issue of biographical objectivity and its relationship with cognitive certainty. Byatt examines this issue, in her critique of biography, by narrativising the intrusion of identification into the biographical contract. By means of the characters in her novel, she demonstrates that over-identification corrupts real knowledge about the subject and his or her world. Although she concedes that a degree of involvement is necessary for a biographer, Byatt encourages readers to question its extent, and whether the objectivity of the biography is unduly diminished by this condition. Byatt employs postmodernist techniques in her work, blurring the boundaries between the contemporary and the historical worlds of the novel to raise ontological questions which relate to biographical objectivity.

In *Possession*, the Victorian story is constructed as a world next door, rather than a lost world of the past. In this other world, which Roland and Maud confront together, their lives appear to cross the threshold of the world of the couple they are investigating, and they are touched by their passion. After setting up a primary diegesis in which the twentieth-century characters are engaged in retrieving documents from the past,
Byatt abruptly juxtaposes this primary diegetic world with the second, or hypodiegetic world, without an explanatory 'bridge'. Thus she induces reader discomfort by creating doubts about how to view the reality status of this secondary world.

Chapters 13 and 14 describe Roland and Maud's rural idyll in Yorkshire, following the trail of a visit made, over a century before, by the two poet/lovers. Chapter 15 begins with a poem which tells of the "kick galvanic" of passion, an expression used previously in relation to the modern couple (P: 147). Following the poem, the narrative picks up the story of "the man and the woman" travelling in a railway carriage (P: 273). The effect of withholding the names of the couple is confusion on the reader's part, since the narrative still appears to be about the modern couple. The images, created by the reader of the modern couple, are superimposed for a time on the Victorian subjects, because the latter are not identified immediately by Byatt, and thus can easily be confused with the twentieth-century couple. In this way, Byatt prepares the ground for the metamorphosis of the modern couple, for their symbolic transmigration into the other world which is a catalyst for their individuation. The device also suggests the notion of *palimpsest*; perhaps the
contemporary couple are simply imagining the past and projecting their own experience onto it. Thus, questions of identification are raised.

The method by which Byatt interpolates the Victorian world into the primary diegesis results in what McHale calls "a zone of hesitation" (1987: 75). The boundaries between the contemporary world, and the Victorian world are violated to the point where convictions about linear time, individual identity and reality are severely shaken, so the reader hesitates between a natural explanation that it is an imagined world, and the supernatural sense of two worlds existing simultaneously. In an attempt to establish a sense of reality, the reader might naturalise the supernatural parallel world by viewing it as a projection of the researcher. In other words, the Victorian narrative might be seen as the subjective sub-world of the researchers.

Unlike Ackroyd who first unsettles, then re-establishes, the reader's belief in "biographical certainties" (D: xv), Byatt refuses any such comfort. In effect, Ackroyd implies that, even though there is a strong element of mimesis in his biography, it
is purely experimental and he is perfectly able to resume control and present an objective narrative. Byatt gives us a Hobson's Choice: We must either accept that her Victorian world exists simultaneously with the contemporary world, in which case our grasp on reality is problematised, or we must accept that her young biographers are unreliable. They identify so strongly with the predicament of the Victorian couple that they make an imaginative leap. Either way, the credibility of the Victorian world is challenged.

Byatt achieves this effect by creating parallels between both worlds. Details of the characters’ appearance and personality, and events in both narratives have too remarkable a synchronicity. Twentieth-century Maud resembles nineteenth-century Christabel Lamotte in many details. Maud and Roland revisit the sites of the historical couple and share their experiences at these sites. There is also a linking of consciousness by means of myth. For example, the Melusina prohibition, written about by LaMotte in the nineteenth century, is broken by Roland in the twentieth century when he peers into the Baileys’ bathroom to see if Maud is there. These parallels create a kind of mise-en-abîme which might be read as an
imaginative inner world. The empathy which they feel for the two poets, developed over years of studying their work is, perhaps, bordering on possession. The line is blurred between identifying with biographical subjects, Byatt implies, and really understanding their mode of existence.

Byatt is preoccupied with the notion that we cannot fully understand the mode of existence of a removed subject. As biographers or writers, she suggests, we construct, or re-present them in terms of our own modes of existence. When she exposes the gap between people or characters and their representation, Byatt is shifting the emphasis from problems of knowing to problems of being. The reader observes the misconceptions about being which are so often made by students of people from other 'worlds' of time and place. Maud is not privy to Christabel LaMotte's true subjectivity, Byatt indicates, but is merely creating LaMotte in her own likeness. We learn of Ash's perception of what Christabel "really was or could be, or in freedom might have been" (P : 278). These conditional phrases invite us to think of what she might have been: fiercely independent, meeting him with passion and yet self-possessed. Byatt suggests, however, that the character
description, so formed, is that of Maud. From the perspective of the late twentieth century, we cannot really understand her way of being. The problem of biographical characterisation is not related to having knowledge of facts and events, but to the difficulty of understanding a mode of being. Byatt indicates a theory, then, that the subject of biography is constructed in much the same way as a fictional subject.

As the uncovered documents reveal more details of LaMotte's life, Roland's imagination is sparked, and a new narrative evolves. It is presented to us as a parallel Victorian narrative, but might be construed as a kind of biography. Thus the process, and the constructed nature of biography, are laid bare. By illicitly animating the product of the biography in her narrative and, at the same time, demonstrating the misconceptions to which biographers are prone, Byatt reveals its fictional quality. She simulates how biographers can "become consistent and orderly too late, on insufficient grounds, and perhaps in the wrong direction" (P: 151). It is almost as if she is answering Ackroyd's confident assurance that "the spirit fully lives" in the details of a subject's life. (D: xvi). The effect of Byatt's refusal to present us with an orderly
narrative is a statement about the problematic issue of truth in biography. Byatt insists that the biographical narrative, seemingly so inevitable, is a contrivance which serves to conceal the biographer’s ignorance.

Byatt simulates the nihilism of late twentieth-century belief in her pastiche of the random remains of fictional lives. We are faced with a hybrid collection of documents, rather than a seamless and omniscient narrative, which has the effect of emphasising the many problems of documentary evidence with which the biographer has to contend. Thus, in Possession, we can discern an allegory for biography.

McHale claims that the revival of allegory in postmodernist writing can also be related to postmodernism’s ontological Poetics (1987: 141). A characteristic of allegory in postmodernist writing is its elusive quality; the literal frame of reference is left in doubt, and often multiple indications are made. Possession invites a number of potential allegorical readings. Some of the abstract meanings, which might be specified, include contemporary criticism, the worlds of discourse and their construction of particular realities, and the
writing process itself. One allegorical reading, which relates to all of these other meanings, specifies the novel's meaning in terms of the biographical process. Byatt uses the allegorical function of the novel, then, to conduct her critique of biography.

A major reason for my privileging of biography as the main allegory in *Possession* is the use, by Byatt, of the postmodernist technique of pastiche. Pastiche has strong relevance to the subject of biography which uses fragments of writing; documents such as letters, memoirs, records, and the writer's work, inform the construction of the 'life'. *Possession* is a pastiche of letters, journals, myth and fairy tale, and some of the literary output of the fictional poets. This simulates the hybrid nature of biographical sources. The elements of the pastiche are both stylistically and thematically imitative of other writing, in some cases quite specifically recognisable. Ash's poetry, for instance, has resonances of Browning's monologues and love poetry, and also Tennyson's highly lyrical and mythological poetry. "Swammerdam" (*P*: 202-209) is an extended poem in which the poetic imagination is combined with history and, in the manner of Browning's monologues, reflects religious doubt. "Mummy Possest" (*P*: 405-412) has
clear reference to the real Browning's anxiety about his wife's interest in 'table rapping' or spiritualism. "The Garden of Proserpina" (*P* : 463-465) is like some of Tennyson's poetry reflecting on the riddle of life and death, but uses a mixture of pagan and Christian mythology. The shorter Ash poems are mainly robust love poems, again reminding us of Browning.

The letters are characteristic of the Victorian interest in correspondence, and reflect many of the issues that preoccupied Victorians in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Religious doubt, the new interest in science, especially Darwinian theory, mesmerism, spiritualism, women's roles and autonomy, mythology and, of course, literary matters, are all discussed in the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte (*P* : 157-201). Ellen's journal (*P* : 222-232, 442-443) is imitative of the awareness of some of the wives of Victorian writers or public figures that their journals will be read. The intimate is marginalised, or restricted as incidental, in entries which are preoccupied with domestic management. In many ways Ellen's journal is a testament to her husband's virtues. This will be fuel, the reader suspects, for his future biographers.
Byatt has a deft touch with a range of literary forms included in the novel: the different styles of poetry, the Victorian correspondence, the different types of journals. This causes the reader to speculate about whether they are genuine. When reading them for the first time, there is uncertainty about which elements of the pastiche, if any, are fictional. The all-consuming nature of the biographical search is also simulated, to some degree, by the detective work in which the reader needs to engage, in order to identify the sources of the elements of the pastiche.

Also included in the pastiche is the Victorian narrative, written in the style of the Victorian novel with the detailed descriptions of the characters and their environments, and telling the tale of passionate romance. But the Victorian narrative, as I have explained, also simulates the product of the biographer's research; it is the narrative which might be arbitrarily constructed from the documents. The contemporary narrative, binding the fragments together, allows the reader to observe the personalities, influences, and motivations of 'real' and potential biographers which impact on the nature of a biography. Thus the pastiche in Possession simulates the
documents, the conditions and the process of biography.

But the device is used, by Byatt, as a vehicle for conveying the narrative and subjective uncertainties that plague modern biography. The narrative structure of *Possession*, made up as it is of disconnected and often obscure fragments, emphasises the true nature of biography which many biographers strive to conceal; it is designed to conceal ignorance about many aspects of the subjects' lives. The reader follows the process by which the scholars construct a 'character' and a narrative from these fragments, and we are made aware of their misinterpretations.

Byatt, however, also pays tribute to the attraction and power of biography. By examining other lives, writers and readers are able to re-establish a sense of coherence and meaning. Byatt implies that the nostalgia that people feel for lost worlds is not a bad thing. The central momentum within her novel is, after all, the quest to retrieve lost lives from the past. This is not to say that the reality of these other lives is available to us, but the effort to find out about them, in itself, has the power to release the biographer and the reader from the paralysis caused by post-modernist theorising and disillusion.
When Roland Michell looks at the death mask of Ash, the subject of his biographical quest,

he could and could not say that the mask and the man were dead. What had happened to him was that the ways in which it could be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not. (P : 473)

Roland's intellectualising and theorising have removed him from the one reality that had always been there: the poetry of Ash was not dead. By reading it, Roland could always reach the essence of the man.

In Possession, the process of biography is examined in relation to the crisis of the postmodernist condition: the paralysis which can result from cognitive uncertainty about the world and our mode of existence in it. Roland, a PhD working as a minor research assistant, has a pervasive sense of failure. Roland knows that "there isn't a unitary ego - how we're made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things", knows love to be "a suspect ideological construct" (P : 267). He thinks of himself only in terms of others. His training in the post-
structuralist deconstruction of the subject has resulted in him deconstructing himself almost out of existence. Roland has yet to face up to the 'dark tower' of his own consciousness, and the biographical quest is the means by which he does this.

While he is pursuing traces of Ash and LaMotte through England and Europe, Roland continues to make routine job-applications for lectureships in English at a number of universities. Although there is no real connection between the search for the hidden part of Ash's life, and Roland's career taking off, the implication is that the former gave impetus to the latter. After years of futile endeavour, Roland is offered lecturing positions at three different universities, and his way of seeing himself changes dramatically. Three professors admire his work, so Roland's view of it changes, confirming his belief that "one needs to be seen by others to be sure of one's existence" (P: 468).

In effect, Roland gains a sense of identity and place in his own world by making a connection with another, more coherent world, the world of the past. This confidence transfers to his interaction in the present world. So Byatt conveys an
affirmative view of biography; it is the value which biography places on the individual life and its inspirational force. But she balances this against her questioning of the biographer's claim to profound understanding of his or her subject. By drawing attention to the contrivances of the writing process, she suggests that biographers construct a version of a life which accords with their own world-frames, and need for artistic coherency.

Byatt's novel, in conjunction with Ackroyd's biography, allows the reader to examine the powerful effects of the interaction between the novel and the biography. Together, they lead to an understanding of the way in which fictional devices can enhance our enjoyment of biography, even as, by definition, they infuse a fictional element into the portrayal of the subject in his or her world-frame. Byatt and Ackroyd focus on a similar period of history, and examine similar issues, but use different media. There are similarities and differences to be found in their discussion of the contemporary portrayal of subject from a removed era. Because of Dickens' range of experience of different levels of society, Ackroyd claims, in his characterisation of Dickens, to present someone who is
representative of the "Victorian character" ($D: 1142$). His biography, then, is of a changing figure which exemplifies all men of the period. This compression of a whole range of Victorian people into Dickens' character is, according to Ackroyd, a "perception into the very nature of the world ... which biography itself must strive to exemplify" ($D: 1143$). He seems to be suggesting that we can access a range of classes and types of Victorian times by examining the life of Dickens. Byatt, however, causes us to question whether the representation of any person can exemplify the mode of existence of an age, unless the subject is a fictional construct. Nevertheless, Byatt and Ackroyd have a shared belief about biography. Although they express different theories with regard to textuality and fictionality, they both make a statement that the attempt to connect historical events and lives with the present has its rewards. With imagination, researchers into past lives can cross the threshold into another world, and by so doing, can learn some truths about their own.
Summary

John Batchelor begins his introduction to *The Art of Literary Biography* with a quotation from Terry Eagleton who, commenting on the phenomenon of public interest in biography says: "there would seem no end to the peculiar English mania for the Individual Life" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 1). In an essay in the same text, "Biography: Cult as Culture", Jurgen Schlaeger offers an answer to this, and also to Victoria Glendinning's question on why, especially as people get older, they tell you they would rather read biography". Schaefer suggests that "the thirst for facts, experience, and identity in an age when they are threatened by a loss of authority may be one of the answers sought" (in Batchelor ed. 1995: 67). Ackroyd and Byatt, in their different ways, put this appetite for facts, experience and identity to the test of modernist cynicism in their respective contributions to the growing literature on biography. Given the spate of theoretical writing in the last two decades of the twentieth century, it would appear that there is also a thirst for this kind of critical discussion on the biography genre.

Ackroyd and Byatt also put to the test a claim made by Ira
Nadel in *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (1984), and cited in the introduction to this thesis, that, because it is not seen as an aesthetic subject, there has been a barrier to the growth in a Poetics of biography. Ackroyd and Byatt refute both elements of Nadel's statement, giving readers the alternative idea that biography *should* aspire to aesthetic status, and it *does* offer scope for considerable theoretical interest. In these considerations, too, they contribute to a debate addressed by scholars throughout the twentieth century.

In "The Art of Biography" and "The New Biography" (Woolf, L. ed 1953), Virginia Woolf discusses changing directions in biography in the twentieth century with regard to two important questions. These questions, which still interest Ackroyd and Byatt, concern whether biography is an art, and whether it is possible to weld "truth of fact and truth of fiction" (1953: 234). In "The Art of Biography" (in Woolf, L. ed 1953), Woolf questions whether art can work within the constraints imposed on biography. Woolf's conclusion, in "The Art of Biography", is that the work of a biographer is valuable, but not quite a work of art. She gives the biographer credit for stimulating the tired imagination more than "any poet or
novelist save the very greatest " (1953: 227). In "The New Biography", however, published some twelve years after "The Art of Biography", Woolf acknowledges that the biographer "has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist" (1953: 231).

Woolf looks at the relationship between biography and fiction in these discussions, but does not attribute equal status to the two forms. Neither does Byatt and neither, perhaps, does Ackroyd, though both develop an interest in this matter in their respective works. When the works of the two writers are read together, however, the two forms can be seen as complementary, rather than in opposition, just as the ideas of Byatt and Ackroyd, in conjunction, are complementary to a theory of biography, rather than being in opposition. In Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form, Nadel cites Beaussant, who argues that "every biography tends to the imaginary as every fiction, in its exploration of time and individual psychology in action, tends towards biography" (1984: 204). It is no longer possible to ignore the influence of each of the two forms upon the other.
In their critiques of biography, using different media to examine a number of its major issues, Byatt and Ackroyd part company to some extent on some issues, while reaching agreement on others. On the issue of truth and authority in biography, they differ, although both writers agree that the effort of the biographer to transmit the truth is of value in itself, as it is encouraging and enlightening to readers. Ackroyd asserts, by his methodology, that the basic prerequisite of a biography is its claim to tell the truth of its subject, however problematic that might be. Byatt argues, by means of her fictional biographers, that the truth of even the best biography is partial.

Ackroyd and Byatt both concede the problems of engendered biography, though they illuminate the issue in different ways. Ackroyd maintains his position of authority with regard to the representation of women, a position deemed by him to be essential for a biographer. By enacting a biography which simulates the nineteenth-century convention of marginalising the women in his subject's life, however, he provides a paradigm of the process, which allows the reader an insight into the issue. Byatt provides a more straightforward critique
in her biography-in-a-novel. She reveals the fictionality of the representations of women in nineteenth-century biography and, thus, argues the corollary that biographies which marginalise women are unbalanced and inaccurate.

On issues of textuality, Ackroyd and Byatt part company in their theoretical orientation, and in their philosophy regarding the constructed nature of biography. Ackroyd examines the effects of the novel form on biography, by fictionalising his biography, and foregrounding the effect of using techniques of fiction on his work. He implies that the fictional forms are an inevitable, but not necessarily destructive, force in the transmitting of a truth of a subject's life. Byatt approaches the issue from a postmodernist perspective, demonstrating the way generic shaping influences our way of perceiving reality. She emphasises that fictional devices, by definition, impact on the truth-value of biography.

Both writers reach agreement on a very significant justifying, and defining principle of literary biography, included by Dale Salwak, in the preface of *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions* (1996). Salwak argues that, within the
scope of literary biography, lies "any book that possesses literary merit, that attempts to stimulate a reader's imagination through the magic of language" (1996: ix). This is a criterion that might be applied to the novel, as well as the biography, and the notion tends to dispel any remaining hierarchies attached to the two genres. In their critiques of biography, by virtue of their chosen medium, in which each writer examines biography, Byatt and Ackroyd imply a preference for their particular form, at least for the purpose of fulfilling their contract to contribute to a Poetics of biography. They do not, however, dismiss the claim of either the novel, or the biography, to convey essential truths of human nature. Both argue that it depends on the integrity and the artistry of the writer. As Victoria Glendinning puts it, in reply to a question about whether biography is a craft or an art: "If it's an artist that's writing it, it's an art" (Appendix: 22). Then, in Glendinning's opinion, there is room for any amount of experiment: "You can do anything" (Appendix: 21).

In their experiments in examining biography, Peter Ackroyd and A.S. Byatt also go some way towards testing Somerset Maugham's witty aphorism about biography, cited by Salwak in
The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions: "There are three rules for biography, but, unfortunately, no one knows what they are" (1996: ix). Ackroyd and Byatt's attempts to formulate a contribution to the Poetics of literary biography, result in the certain knowledge of at least one rule: The biographer must aspire to artistry since, if he or she adheres to aesthetic principles, a certain truth will emerge. On this rests the primary claim of literary biography.
Conclusion

Byatt's and Ackroyd's texts, despite their categorisation in different genres, have given me the opportunity to make an original contribution to the new and growing poetics of literary biography. By means of these texts, as well as associated critical material, I have examined, not only the disputed boundaries between the literary biography and the novel, but also the interface between literature and literary criticism. My research has revealed that there is scope for an examination of critical issues in the works of Byatt and Ackroyd because both writers have transgressed beyond the traditional territory occupied by practitioners in their particular genres. The two writers demonstrate an academic interest in their subject matter as well as carrying out their generic contracts.

This in itself has allowed me to employ a radical method in order to arrive at some ideas on literary biography. I have examined two works which, some would argue, are inappropriate for the study since they do not occupy a purist position in generic terms, or in the world of literary criticism. Yet, I would argue that I have discovered more about literary
biography by destabilising the genre with the parallel study of a novel than I would have done with a conventional choice of text. Moreover, Ackroyd's biographical work, in its flirtation with the fictional form, emphasises that which it is not. I have, therefore, been able to show that Dickens is indisputably a literary biography by comparing it with Byatt's postmodernist novel, and with Possession's embedded model of an inferior biographical product. By means of my new methodology, then, I have formulated some canons which might be added to the existing Poetics of biography.

My study has affirmed biography's legitimacy as a transmitter of truth. An examination of the work of practising biographers and scholars has enabled me to formulate a theory which counters postmodernist cynicism about the way in which we view the world and represent the people in it. The postmodernist movement has led us to wonder if, perhaps, biography is indistinguishable from fiction. From my reading of biography, and critical writings on the subject, it would appear that biography and fiction are clearly distinguishable, although they make a common claim to convey that which might best be defined as artistic truth. My researches have indicated that a
good biographer has the capacity to transmit an essential truth about his or her subject, as well as to discern and express the universal meanings and truths that we all seek as readers of that subject's life. According to biographers and theorists of biography, a good biographer makes choices, shapes information, imposes order on the disorder of assembled materials, imposes his or her own personality on the work as a whole, yet strives to be as objective as possible. On the basis of a study of Dickens and Possession and related scholarship, it can be deduced that, after self-serving or propagandist works are defined out of the genre, biography can give us something unique in literature: it can tell us about someone who lived in fact. Yet this study also indicates that biography and art need not be incompatible. Artistry and fact can, and must, co-exist in biography if it is to be so defined, since artistry can be a way of conveying truth. The biographer should use all the tools of the literary trade. Figurative language, form and use of the imagination all have the capacity to enhance the bald facts.

After examining the positions adopted by a range of biographers and scholars, it appears that the credibility of the biographer is re-affirmed in the contemporary climate. The
biographer's authority is re-asserted, along with biography's claim to transmit an essential truth about its subject. Moreover, my researches have indicated a growing confidence in the biographer's ability to fulfil his or her contract to tell us something about the way in which the events and circumstances of the subject's world caused him or her to think in a certain way about issues which still concern us. There is a strong awareness, in the bulk of recent literature associated with biography, that we are being given this information by a fallible human being whose consciousness is profoundly influenced by the shared assumptions of his or her culture. Nevertheless, from my examination of this literature, I have formed a theory that the biographer's study has put him or her in a position to convey to us something of that which s/he has discovered.

The profileration of theoretical writing on gender issues in the latter part of the twentieth century has generated questions of authority with regard to biography. My researches have indicated a growing consciousness of the element of fictionality in historical representations of women. This awareness, I have observed, has profoundly influenced the way in which biographies of subjects who lived in other eras are
now read, and the way in which biographies are now written. My examination of this issue, by means of biographical writing and critical approaches to biography, has led to another canon which might be added to the Poetics of biography: Biography is no longer solely a male contract. Many biographies, written in the past, cannot be taken at face value, since they fail to take into account the significance of women in the lives they address. A revisionist approach to biography includes experiments with conventions of past eras which marginalised, or silenced women's voices. The notion of biography as a male contract is challenged widely by biographers with the result that practitioners and subjects of biography now include a more even balance of men and women. An underlying theory, which might be added to the existing Poetics of biography, is that a balanced representation of the men and women who comprise the world of a subject is an essential ingredient of biography. Moreover, my observation of critical materials is that, by including the critical perspectives of men and women, the Poetics of biography is enlarged and enhanced.

The study of literary biography has led me to formulate a theory which concerns the relationship between the life and the
work of a subject of literary biography. As my thesis shows, both Possession and Dickens reveal the value of literary biography as an aid to understanding the subject's work. My reading of biography and the works of scholars has revealed that the biographical approach to literature has re-asserted itself. There is a ground-swell of belief, following the temporary ascendancy of the purely textual schools of criticism, that literary biography enhances understanding of the subject's works, since the writer is present in all of these works. In this respect, contemporary biographers and many critical writers take issue with the postmodernist critic who lays claim to take any interpretative path he or she might wish, following the contemporary notion of the demise of the author. This is not to suggest that, as readers of a work, we can assume that fictional writing directly reflects the facts of the writer's life, but rather that the events of that life are the artistic source of his or her work. Knowledge of events of the writer's life, then, sheds light on the creative acts which coincide with them. It would appear, from my examination of literary biography, that one of the lures of the genre is that it provides a route to the writer's possible meanings.
My reading of biography and its associated literature also indicates that another important function of the literary biography is to explicate the historical milieux in which the subject lived and wrote, since we can better understand the work if we understand the forces of the age. Many contemporary biographers are demonstrating their belief in the importance of this aspect of writing a life. This understanding is a further canon which might be contributed to the Poetics of biography. The underlying principle of this aspect of biography, it would appear, is that the subject is a creature of his or her time, whether s/he accepts or rejects prevailing ideas, and this bears on what s/he writes.

There is scope for a detailed study, from an historical perspective, which deals with the significance, to biography, of the wider historical movements of a period. My observation of the directions of recent biographies, and of brief allusions in attendant literature, is that study of the sphere of influences brought to bear on a subject's identity should be enlarged beyond that of his immediate environment. There is an emerging interest, reflected in the literature associated with biography, in the artistic, political, spiritual, economic, and
intellectual movements of a society. An examination of this trend would be a useful addition to the Poetics of biography. For instance, the re-emergence of the group biography in the last two decades is a reflection of the current interest in the social forces which impact on the individual. The increasing number of group biographies which take into account the relation of a subject's ideas to those of his or her contemporaries, suggests that there is a place in the Poetics of biography for an examination of this direction in biography.

A perspective of biography, which I have found to be notably absent from the literature of biography, or is accorded very minimal reference, is that coming directly from the living subject. This area of concern to many celebrated writers, and to those close to them, would be an interesting and useful contribution to the Poetics of biography. Clearly, discussion of ethical issues of biography, such as invasion of privacy, from the point of view of subjects, or victims, as they often style themselves, would be of inestimable value to the biography industry. It would help provide deeper understanding and, perhaps, guidelines which would lead to greater sensitivity in biographical sleuthing.
It is clear that there is room for a Poetics of literary biography in the current critical climate. In the course of my reading of critical works concerning biography, I have encountered negative and positive attitudes to practically every initiative in biography but, derogatory or laudatory, discussions and comments all reveal an interest in directions and theories of biography. A common feature of most discussions is an interest in advancing the art of literary biography. This means change, which will not always be to the taste of traditionalists, but will give energy and impetus to the genre. My own reading on the subject has convinced me that biography is evolving quickly and I believe that this, in turn, will generate still more interest in the genre.

A number of reasons have emerged from my research, which account for biography's increased following in the latter part of the twentieth century. There is a re-established confidence in the genre's capacity to transmit truth about an inspiring life. There is a return to the historical and biographical approach as a way of understanding literary works. There is also an appreciation of biography's potential, and achievement as an art
form. Recent biographies are very readable, and provide great aesthetic pleasure, with the diverse employment, by the writer, of his or her artistic sensibilities. This, I would argue, has also generated the rapidly growing interest in a Poetics of biography, since an increased awareness of the artistic possibilities of biography invites critical attention. This has been the motivating force of my examination of biography. In his work, *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey defined biography as being "the most delicate and humane of all branches of the art of writing" (1948: 10). My contribution to the contemporary Poetics of biography begins, and concludes, with that basic assertion.
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An Examination of Biography


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An Examination of Biography


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Appendix

An interview with Victoria Glendinning

Sylvia McLeod: When I approached you for this interview, you claimed that you have little knowledge about theoretical issues of biography - that you "just do it". However, apart from the introductions to your biographies, where you comment on some of the issues I want to ask you about, there is a discursive element within the body of your biographies on Rebecca West and Trollope, particularly. Do you have an interest in contemporary biographical issues?

Victoria Glendinning: Not really. I just take every single biography as a sort of challenge that I do, and let the punishment fit the crime. Every situation is different, it seems to me, for every person that I do. I learn by doing. When asked I will talk about it, but I have no theoretical basis that I am aware of, though as you say there is probably some kind of drive, or shaping force, that I am probably not all that aware of. Maybe if I was asked to write a question I could see what it was, but I don't read theory of biography; I didn't know there was any.
S.M: There is very little, and that's why there is a growing interest in theoretical issues along with the brisk trade in biographies themselves.

V.G: Absolutely.

S.M: In Vita, you made a comment in the preface about the degree of focus on the secondary characters in the biography.

V.G: Yes, I think this is because I see my first duty is to be read, to be readable, so you can't give everybody equal value, though in their own lives they do, and it seems so unfair. It occurs when I interview what I call survivors, when you're doing a fairly modern person, when the people they knew, or the people they were intimately connected with, are still alive. Of course, each survivor is the centre of his own life, and the person you are trying to find out about is either less, or more important in their lives. Their life is the real focus, and anyway it's a bit unfair. You're saying, "I'm not really interested in you per se, in your whole life. No thank you. I'm interested in you in connection with Vita or whoever it was."
I'm just taking a bit of that person, and I sometimes feel that it's an abuse of them, in a way, because it's a falsifying of their perspective. You're just taking the bit of them you want. People, naturally, want themselves to be in the frame. People are not without vanity, and sometimes they make their own standing in relation to the person you're asking about, more important than maybe it really was, or how they would like it to be.

S.M: They make the most of it.

V.G: Yes, they make the most of it. Sometimes they're old, so they misremember, and you think, that couldn't have been right. If I know the dates, or something - that couldn't have been right. I don't think they very often mislead on purpose, but you know yourself, if you're asked about something in the past, you do get it wrong a little bit.

S.M: Well, yesterday!

V.G: Well, yesterday, you can tell me! It's that slightly distorting effect of talking to somebody about somebody else.
S.M: You were commenting on that phenomenon in Rebecca West. It must have been a particular problem, trying to find the truth about her life.

V.G: Yes, because she was a fantasist, if you like. She was a drama queen, and so all her stories were reshaped and reframed to make sense to her, but to somebody else, it was completely different. So who are we following here? Are we getting into Rebecca's perception and saying, "This is how it was to Rebecca", or are you saying "Actually, Rebecca was a bit off beam here"? Whose eyes are you looking through? So you have to find a balance there in some way. And if somebody's perceptions are way out from other people's, then that's interesting in itself, so you have to give what you could call the standard perspective to show that somebody is a bit unorthodox in their interpretation of events.

S.M: Rebecca's son had such a totally different view of experiences they shared.

V.G: Absolutely. And both of them thought they were telling
the truth. You know there isn't just one truth. When you begin, you think you could just be repeating a lie, but as I've gone on, I've realised there isn't such a thing.

S.F: *It's the old philosophical debate, isn't it: What is truth?*

V.G: *What is truth? Again, it's just common sense, like the way we see our own lives. If we all went to a party and gave an account of it, they'd all be different parties.*

S.M: *And when our children come home and tell us what they did, it's not the same party.*

V.G: Absolutely. And anything we tell our children might not be quite spot-on either. When I say you're lying, it's not quite the right word. You've got to write a sentence, which says something. But you have to be aware, all of the time, that it's very flexible, very fluctuating. It's very unstable. You're trying to pin something down like a snapshot, but bearing in mind it's deeply unstable really.

S.M: *By chance, I heard an interview that you did in Western*
Australia. In it, the interviewer quoted you as saying that you were bored with biography, and were leaning towards writing fiction in preference. Is this the case?

V.G: Well I wouldn't say bored. I think that part of this growing consciousness of instability makes me impatient of the linear biography, cradle to grave. You know - the adolescence, the maturity, the career, the love affairs, the decline. And that rack - I don't know if I can plough through it anymore; up the mountain and down the other side. We all live in the same way which is called dying. I'm writing now about Jonathan Swift and I don't know how it's going to come out, because of the way I'm writing it. I'm doing something that's probably going to be a total failure. I'm going to have a first chapter, say a thirty page mini-biography, which is the conventional story of his life, like a resume of a conventional biography. Then I want to unpack it and say, "O.K. that's what they say. Now we'll unpack it." I'll then take themes like his childhood, his health (which was very dodgy), his attitude to women, his political life, and the actual world he lived in; his wigs and his suits and so on.

S.M: Swift had an intriguing fetish about cleanliness and filth,
didn't he?

V.G: That's right. "Celia shits". He had a scatological obsession. I'll come to terms with all that. I'm not sure how I will end it, this unpacking of a suitcase. At the end of these things, maybe it wasn't like that, maybe it was like this. But then at the end I've got to somehow make a shape to round it off, which may actually involve making some statements of definite opinion, which is going to be harder. I've got to put all the things I've taken out of the suitcase together again, at the end, and I'm not quite sure how that's going to turn out. So it's a risk I'm taking, but for my own sake it's what I have to do because I can't any longer go along the normal road.

S.M: This is an entirely different approach. I wish you'd written it already.

V.G: I wish I'd written it already. I could do something else; go out and write another novel. I will have written it by the end of the year though, because I've got a total deadline.

S.M: Another point apropos of 'proper subjects'. You cited
Rebecca West saying: "A Diary of a Nobody is a classic, but the Life of a Nobody is nothing". How do you feel about that when looking at the fascinating Victorian lives of women, so much encoded, yet saying so much?

V.G: I think it's very hard to get near them. I don't know if you've read the little book out fairly recently about Emily Tennyson, Lord Tennyson's wife?

S.M: That's Ann Thwaite's, isn't it?

V.G: Anne Thwaite, yes. It ends up really just as much about Tennyson as about her. If you're going to make it a full life like that, I find it unsatisfactory because ... I thought that Thwaite's a very good writer, but it didn't seem to work for me because all she could deal with was the domestic intricacy in between what was happening in his public life. The truth is that a lot of women's lives were, in the terms of a modern woman, boring and insignificant. They might have had fierce imaginations, but you can't get at them. Nothing happened.

S.M: No, and besides, they covered up the things that we might
like to know about.

V.G: Yes, I think you can decode the Victorian novel quite well. I felt these constraints very much when I was writing about Trollope and reading his novels. Because of the strictures of what he could not say in print, you know, he could not come straight out with so-and-so was sleeping with so-and-so in a novel. It all has to be done much more subtly, and it seems to me that people like Trollope and George Eliot suggest barred sex, or happy sexual relationships, or terrific sexual tension, with terrific skill. It's like somebody who was very good at mathematics or arithmetic, say, and then finds they've got a calculator and they don't bother anymore. We don't have to bother anymore to write that skilfully; we can just come out with it, so we're much cruder, blunter instruments, because we don't have to work our way round things. I don't think we're any better communicators.

S.M: It's a bit like the obscenity that takes the place of a more complex vocabulary.

V.G: Absolutely.
S.M: *I remember reading the transcript of a speech that Ann Thwaite gave at a biography convention at a university in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. She was talking then about how she was starting to write Emily Tennyson's life. She mentioned her [Emily's] notebook containing what size hat he wore.*

V.G: Yes, it was such a service industry, it's not desperately interesting to read about.

S.M: *But then, Emily Tennyson didn't really write herself, did she.*

V.G: No, she transcribed her husband's poems. She gave him hints; she used to leave on his desk, ideas and things he might write a poem about. I'm not saying I want these women forgotten at all, but I think the sort of resurrection of women's lives when they were very limited has a very limited point.

S.M: *Yet that's not how Rose came across in the Trollope biography. You said you focussed on her more and more; she grew, really, as you wrote.*
V.G: Yes, but I couldn't quite get to her, still. I was seeing her round the corner, round the corner, round the corner, all the time.

S.M: Can I ask you about a footnote you wrote concerning Trollope's infatuation for Kate Field: "I cannot prove that he told her, nor that she reacted as I say, but I am sure of it" (p 316).

V.G: This is the terrible thing about biography, that you might be sure of something, and you think, aha! I know. Yet you have no proof at all, and if you were writing a novel you would be on your way. But I do have a sense of responsibility. You must not say what you don't know.

S.M: So you can't just rely on "the biographical instinct", so-named by Thwaite?

V.G: I think the biographical instinct is very important. But if you stop being clear in your own mind what was speculation, and what you know, you're lost - you're not reliable any more.
S.M: So your belief is that you should say, "This is what I think, but I can't really be sure".

V.G: Yes. You see, I think that biography has always been too authoritative; telling you, giving it to you, this is the package. What I want to do now is maybe unsatisfactory to the reader. I want to say, "Look, it could be this, or it could be this. Over to you. What do you think?" But in a way I think people read in order to feel certainty, because our lives are so terrifyingly random, and we're not quite sure what anything's about at all, or why we're here. I think one of the comforts of reading, especially the reading of lives, is to have something framed, and explained and given meaning to.

S.M: I think it's one of the effects of not having religion. Biography acts as a kind of moral guide; this is what's right or wrong.

V.G: Absolutely. This is what's right or wrong. This how to live your life, or not live your life. This is a model, or not a model. All the time you're comparing, when reading biography.
My God, she did that! How extraordinary. I wouldn't have dared to do that. So I think the reader reads for the purpose of acquiring some certainty, whereas for the writer, you become less and less certain of your 'certainties'. You long to pass the buck back to the reader. You say, "I can tell you this, but you can make your own mind up now". But it may not be 'popular'; it may not be what people want.

S.M: I think it is. It's happening more and more. I found when dealing with Ackroyd's biography of Dickens - and it's very readable - that I became more and more hostile to the man.

V.G: To Ackroyd or to Dickens?

S.M: Certainly to Dickens, of course! But to Ackroyd, too. Because I found he says, "It could be this, or it could be this - you can make up your own mind. But actually, it's this". Inevitably, he came back to the authoritative statement, and of particular interest, did so in regard to Ellen Ternan.

V.G: Did you read Claire Tomalin's book, which I think is very good? It's very investigative; it's very good detective work.
S.M: Yes. It is, and so much more credible than Ackroyd's claim: Dickens had this fantasy in his mind which he lived with for thirteen years. Who's going to believe that?

V.G: No.

S.M: His treatment of Ellen Ternan was not very convincing. Then again, in the T.S Eliot book, he did the same thing with Vivienne, really; he diminished her.

V.G: Well you see he wouldn't be very interested in the women anyway. I mean, he's a very gay man. A floridly gay man. So he's not going to feel that those women have very much significance, because they couldn't have for him. That's the other problem, not just for Peter, who is actually a wonderful writer. We all bring our own concerns - what we're interested in. So Claire was interested in resurrecting Ellen, Peter wasn't. That's what's so interesting. There isn't such a thing as a definitive biography because every single person, working on the same material, picks out different things.
S.M: He dutifully dealt with her - there's so much material included about Ellen, little essays at the end, and so on - but what he gleaned from all this is simply incredible.

V.G: Yes. It was nothing all the time.

S.M: According to Ackroyd, she was just the embodiment of Dickens' fantasy; pure and untouched.

V.G: But then again, we'll never know.

S.M: The evidence was so carefully destroyed. To move on to the issue of psychoanalysis. I've noticed a change in your attitude towards your use of psychoanalysis in biography. In Vita, you made a point that it would be very interesting to do an analytical study based on her writing, but you didn't feel that you were equipped to do that. You talked much more about psychoanalysis in Rebecca West.

V.G: Well that's because she was analysed. I think I do mention her analysis, and what came out of her analysis. I couldn't just disregard that, because it meant something to her. Whether it
meant something to me or not, it meant something to her, and there was evidence of what she thought, and what came out of it. Also, the mother/son thing was so significant. I have some experience; I was trained as a psychiatric social worker, so I have been into all this a bit. I think that the basic case work training has been very useful to me, because it means that I listen to my subjects. But the point is that it depends what sort of psychoanalysis we are talking about. I have no patience at all with Dr Freud. I think he's neither original nor, in most cases, right nor helpful. I don't think you could describe what I am interested in as psychoanalytical. I am interested in motivation, and how the past activates on the present, and how old relationships overshadow new ones. But that's really experience of life, rather a reading of psychoanalytic works, which I haven't done. It's just fact.

S.M: I think so. But we'll never see things quite the same after Freud.

V.G: No. That's true. But he wasn't even the first to talk about the unconscious. In the eighteenth century they talk about the unconscious mind.
S.M: *And later, Coleridge did.*

V.G: In a way, Freud was an opportunist. He came along and collected what everyone was talking about.

S.M: *The climate was right.*

V.G: People were interested, and went for it. He was a synthesiser and, in the end, a populariser. We’ve all got psychobabble at our fingertips now.

S.M: *It’s very hard not to make connections between people’s writing and their lives. The hoary old chestnut still appears: how much of the writer is revealed in the work? Many writers look very unkindly on the suggestion that their writing reveals their life.*

V.G: Oh, yes. But that’s nothing to do with psychoanalysis, of course. The writer probably needs to leave that or he’d lose his trick. He needs to keep up the deception to himself, otherwise he’d not be able to do it.
S.M: It's too exposing.

V.G: Yes. So, let him have it. You might unpick too much.

S.M: I'll come back to Rose Trollope. I wondered about Julian Hawthorne's comment, cited by you: "His wife was his books". It's an ambiguous comment to me, but obviously, taken it context, it wasn't to you.

V.G: Well, you know Trollope was very good about women? I think he listened to Rose, the sort of animal she was. She probably talked quite a lot, so he learnt what women were like, from that. Extrapolated - I mean, not all women were like Rose, but Rose was like the lowest common denominator. The only woman he ever probably knew really, really well, apart from his mother (a fearsome figure).

S.M: Do you think that what Hawthorne meant was that he draws the detail of his female characters from his observations of Rose?
V.G: She rooted him in the real world, in real life too. She was not an artist; she had her feet on the ground; the grass roots. She gave him access to that. I mean, that sort of middle-class male, with office job and servants. In that situation you can get by as if you live in a glass box. I think she gave him access to the world of feelings, probably.

S.M: Obviously you believe in the value of biography as a genre. Do you argue for the biographer's right to transgress the traditional boundaries of biography?

V.G: What are the traditional boundaries?

S.M: The tradition of chronological narrative, for instance. The balance of narrative techniques with simple objective recounting of events, chronologically. The subjective element. The citing of sources.

V.G: I think you can do what you want, as long as you make the biography so somebody wants to read it. So long as you're true to what you set out to do, you can get away with it. By all means, take your own steps.
S.M: *Do you have a problem with someone writing a biography with no footnotes, for instance? The far end of the spectrum in terms of factual legitimacy.*

V.G: With no footnotes, and no source notes? Well, people who write about footballers and rock stars probably don’t use them. I haven’t read many biographies in the last twenty years which don’t have source notes. It was a forties and fifties thing - gentleman of letters. They didn’t bother because they didn’t know. The slight slippage between academe and professional writing - a lot of academics write biographies, they’re near the material, they’ve got it in the library, and it makes a change from lit crit. That’s given a rigour to the genre, because they go overboard with the source notes. I feel that most professional biographers now would feel that they ought to back up what they said, and why they’ve said it.

S.M: *Have you read Lynne Reid Banks’ biographies of the Brontës? Dark Quartet, and Path to the Silent Country? The books have no source notes, and read like a novel. Banks said she was daunted by the prospect of writing a biography about*
the Brontës, when so much had already been done so, in effect, she narrativised the documents. The documents, letters etc, are turned into dialogue, for example. The books are very readable.

V.G: Oh yes, there's room for everything. You can do anything.

S.M: So you're not a purist?

V.G: No.

S.M: As a writer of biography as well as a novelist, you are in a good position to comment on biography as an art form. Do you consider a biographer to be a craftsman, or an artist?

V.G: I think some biographers are craftsmen, and some are artists. In the same way that somebody makes an apple pie and it's brilliant, it's an art, and some make a regular apple pie. It depends who's writing the biography.

S.M: There is such debate on this issue, and a notable early example is Virginia Woolf, but it's all in the writing.
V.G: Who's writing it; if an artist is writing it, it's an art.

S.M: Do you think the reality of truth can be combined with the artistry of fiction?

V.G: I think you have to tell it. I don't know. I can't do these sort of questions.

S.M: Can I put it another way? The way of writing that's not just literal, but using fictional methods such as metaphor, symbolism, for example. Some might find these sorts of artistic methods a bit nebulous when it comes to telling real events.

V.G: I think you often get at truth through an image. It makes it more oblique, less dogmatic. It saves you from making a black and white statement about something that you're not even sure about. You can suggest something by an image, it's a colouration.

S.M: Henry James talked about 'the truth of fiction' claiming it to be a higher form of truth than the kind transmitted in a
biography. In his terms this kind of truth is something unique to fictional writing. Yet devices such as symbol and metaphor, fictional devices perhaps - that's a way of telling a life, isn't it?

V.G: I think you should use every tool you've got, as in writing fiction. You can pick up this one, or this one, whichever's right for the case in hand.

S.M: I haven't read your autobiography, but -

V.G. I haven't written one, so it's jolly good you haven't.

S.M: Someone told me there was one, just before I left Australia. No wonder I couldn't find it. Do you think you would be happy to have a biography written about yourself?

V.G: It would be extremely difficult. I'm impenetrable. I destroy things; notes, lists. I'd be dead anyway, so it wouldn't matter.

S.M: Regarding that point, do you have a comment to make on
some ethical issues of biography? Privacy versus the publically owned figure, for instance. Is it simply a matter of how much time has elapsed since the subject died -

V.G: I don't think you should destroy the dignity of the subject. I also think you should not betray informants - the survivors. Sometimes they will feel they cannot bear certain things to be revealed, intimacies; that's their life! Often people say, "Don't put that in", but often it doesn't matter because the fact that you know it colours what you do. But you're either a responsible person or an irresponsible person, whether you're writing a biography or going to Harrods. You carry yourself with you.

S.M: I've never been to Harrods.

V.G: It's terrible! Don't even think about it. I won't shop there. Marks and Spencers is the place.

S.M: When it comes to writing a biography about a person who you know resisted being written about, like Henry James -

V.G: It wouldn't matter a damn. Most people say they'd hate to
be written about, but they don’t destroy everything do they?

S.M: *Well he lit a bonfire.*

V.G: Yes, so what was on that bonfire you don’t write about. I don’t think anyone has the right to say "You must not look at me". A cat can look at a king.

S.M: *There speaks a biographer.* Moving back to the art of biography, *could you comment on the use of imagination in biography.* Do you think that interpretation is a different matter to imagination in the artistic sense?

V.G: I think again it depends who you are. Some writers are imaginative, and some are pure researchers. It’s just a particular type of person having to write the biography. Some people can’t help imagining, impersonating, enacting, thinking about being the person they are writing about. Others are just interested in getting it right factually. It’s who is coming to write this biography and, thank goodness, there are all different kinds.
S.M: I was going to ask you a question on design, but you preempted me with your description of your current biography, on Swift. To explore this a little further, do you start the biographical process with a preconceived idea, or does a central motif develop as the work evolves?

V.G: What you start with is the little tiny bit you know about that person, the smattering you've got before you start research. The books you've read about them, or the books by them that you've read.

S.M: The pattern emerges as you go along?

V.G: That is the job, it is a discovery. If you knew already, you'd be terribly knowledgeable.

S.M: In the case of Swift, you're writing a potted version to start with -

V.G: But that you can get out of a book, but it will be "in my own words". There are endless biographies of Swift, and I can do a blanket resumé in twenty pages.
S.M: *Will the design not be complete until you've come to the end of the research stage?*

V.G: To the end of the writing, I'd say. I'm going to bring it together at the end of the writing.

S.M: *Is all the research done initially?*

V.G: I do most of it, but there's no end to research except by saying, "I'm stopping now". You could go on forever; there's always something else. You have to say, "Right, I'm going to start writing on such-and-such a date", and then do it. You've probably done the bulk of the research by then. But I'm writing and researching at the same time, currently. There are things I haven't read. I think, I must read that. One thing leads to another; I need to know more about him before I can write that chapter. You realise that, then you go and fill in the gap. So it goes on almost to the end.

S.M: *It must be quite a luxury to be able to do that, to research until you can say, "I've done enough now".*
V.G: Well it's not so much a luxury as a necessity, if you're going to publish a book. Some people's luxury might be to not publish their book, but to go on working on something forever.

S.M: A bit like Haight's George Eliot. Though he did publish eventually. Another area, which you also touched on earlier, is objectivity. Most would probably agree that biography is about the interaction between the biographer and the subject. Would you go as far as to say that biographies are often as much about the biographer as about the subject?

V.G: They tell you what the biographer's concerns are. The concerns might be mainly literary, mainly about the love affairs, mainly about the historical setting. That tells you what they are interested in, their own expertise, and where they are coming from. Occasionally, there are acts of projection, or identification, which are both useful and dangerous. I think you have to be very aware, if you identify, that you are not quietly writing about yourself. You might be making a brilliant one page analysis of the character, and if you're writing about yourself, ah, excuse me! You have to be
very aware where the line comes, that you're not this person.

S.M: In Ackroyd's biography of Dickens, he acknowledges that.

V.G: I think that if you acknowledge it and are aware of it, you can do what you want. I think the problem comes when you're not sure where you're at, and you are being manipulated by the material.

S.M: Ackroyd made a statement in a documentary film about Dickens, that he wasn't aware of how much he was affected by his research until after he'd finished the biography, and distanced himself from it.

V.G: Sure. When you think of it, you're spending all your working hours with this person that you're writing about.

S.M: I felt after reading, first Vita, then Rebecca West, then Trollope, that there was a varying degree of identification with, and liking for, the subjects. You seemed so much more interested in, and fond of Rebecca West, than of Vita. You also showed a lot of sympathy for Trollope.
V.G: It's hard to be fond of Vita, because she was very ruthless, and very arrogant, in a way. I don't think it's a progress of gradually becoming a nicer person, on my part. It's just by chance that Trollope is a very likeable fellow, and I knew Rebecca a little. I felt very protective towards her.

S.M: You'd met her, and interviewed her once.

V.G: I'd met her a lot of times. I knew her. Vita - I was fascinated by absolutely everything. It didn't enter my head to think whether I was fond of her, or not. It wasn't an issue.

S.M: It wasn't anything to do with your being asked to do the biography, rather than choosing a subject?

V.G: No, because I was asked to do the Trollope biography. I was asked to do the Rebecca biography. Once you commit yourself to something, you have chosen it, or it has chosen you. It doesn't make any difference. It becomes what you're doing.

S.M: Do you think there is, to some degree, a transference of
values from the world of the biographer, your world, to the world of the subject? I'm talking about the difficulty about remaining objective about certain behaviours that might be censured today.

V.G: You have to have a very strong sense of history, in that behaviour that is completely out of order now, wouldn't necessarily have been out of order, would have been normal in the social context, say, of the nineteen thirties. There is an area when the concept of political correctness will not wash, because it is simply ignorance. We think it's silly that the Victorians disapproved of certain things. Equally, it's silly if we disapprove of some of the things that people did in another period. I dislike the awful vanity that says that our values in the nineteen-nineties are somehow better and superior, and definitive. They're just our values, better in some ways perhaps, not in others. To impose our values on them is pointless; they wouldn't have known what you were talking about.

S.M: An example would be to impose values, as a feminist, on someone who is perfectly happy with the status quo, who feels,
in fact, that she has something to gain by the situation as it is.

V.G: Absolutely. They wouldn’t know what you were talking about.

S.M: A similar case can be argued about raising the consciousness of some people in our own society, to the point where they recognise what is ‘wrong’ with their life. This can be quite destructive, too.

V.G: Quite.

S.M: I don’t think it’s too much of a non-sequitur to move, at this point, back to the current interest being taken in biography. In the first place, one could argue that a good biography leads the reader to a deeper understanding and interest in the work of the author. Your biography on Trollope has raised my interest in reading his work. That’s the way the biography worked for me.

V.G: Oh, good. You'll really like him.

S.M: But the point is that many, most people perhaps, will read
the biography of Trollope first.

V.G: I think that some people read literary biographies that never read the author's work at all. They read because of fascination with the lives. I'll bet far more people have read about Virginia Woolf's life, than have read her novels, or her diaries.

S.M: Do you have any comment about the life and work divide in a biography? I have just read a book by Julian Symons on Edgar Ellen Poe, written in sections which separately deal with his life, his work and a discussion of psychoanalysis in relation to Poe. How do you balance the life and the work of your subjects?

V.G: I am more interested in the life, although I wouldn't be writing about them if it wasn't for the work. If a person is extremely talented, or gifted, or magic in some way, that's why they're remembered, and that's why they're probably going to have a biography written on them. But when I come to do that, I find that writing the biography of a writer gives you another ocean to swim in. It gives you another whole field. You can never transcribe the work back into the life directly, because it's
always transformed, or twisted, or there is a "what if" element. But still, it tells you what that person was thinking about. You might say, "Why that poem then? What on earth were you thinking about, that made you write that sort of novel, then?" It gives you a line on what was going on in their heads, in a very useful way.

S.M: You can't separate them really, because that is their life.

V.G: That is their life, exactly.

S.M: Virginia Woolf challenged the idea that the life of a nobody would not be interesting. In effect, she posed the question: why not the life of a nobody?

V.G: You see, you can't get at it. You would have to write a novel. If you wanted to write the life of a nineteenth-century housemaid or parlourmaid, it would be fascinating, but there's no material, so you'd have to write a novel. It could be completely, poetically truthful, or spiritually truthful, but not a biography. You could do an awful lot of non-fiction about social issues. Use a lot of treatises and dissertations about domestic
life then. You could have all the details of setting and artifacts -

S.M: *The world.*

V.G: You could get the world absolutely right, but this young woman you'd have to invent.

S.M: *Claire Tomalin did that, in effect, with Ellen Ternan, because there was very little to go on. Would you see her book as crossing the boundaries of biography?*

V.G: She had more to go on than that. We knew who Ellen Ternan was. It certainly isn't a novel. This housemaid - we don't even know who she is. Ellen had a cosmic relation to Dickens. She wasn't a nobody, for that reason.

S.M: *What has been your primary motive for writing biography? I read somewhere it was because, as a mother of four young children, you wanted something to do!*

V.G: No idea. I didn't write fiction earlier because I wasn't
sure if I could. Non-fiction gives you a peg to lean on. You don't have to look at me; you can look at this thing I'm writing about. There is some security. I've been very happy writing biography. But it was no sort of crusade, or anything like that. One thing led to another.

S.M: Having done biography -

V.G: You get asked to do more biography; you get typecast.

S.M: Has Electricity been very successful?

V.G: It has been. It's going to be filmed. I've just got the second draft script.

S.M: How exciting! Are you doing the screenplay?

V.G: No. But there's many a slip. It takes ages, and then the film doesn't always get made, so I'm not counting my chickens before they are hatched. But just the thought that it's going along, and it might be, is good.
S.M: I'll look forward to it. After Swift, will you go back to fiction?

V.G: Yes, I'll write another novel.

S.M: I'll look forward to that too. But perhaps I should wind up now. I have plenty to go on with. Thanks, Victoria.

V.G: I'm sorry I was so useless about the theory issues.

S.M: That's not so. You were very direct and, in some way, made a mockery of some of these intensely debated issues. Feet on the ground style. I come away with the impression that many of the issues that are the focus of theory are quite self-evident to a hands-on biographer. It has the effect of demystifying the practice of biography.