STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES
Volume 15 Edited by Koray Melikoğlu

Rana Tekcan

Too Far for Comfort

A Study on Biographical Distance

Second, Revised and Expanded Edition

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For Ali and Lale
and for Selim

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Foreword

> To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world.
>
> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

Biographers are curious people. Their business is other people's lives. They stand at the crossroads of human curiosity and a certain kind of generosity: By plunging into the life of another, they try to realize an individual's ultimate attempt at understanding, reconstructing, even recreating the life of another individual, at capturing the essence of a life and a mind. At the same time, by making this attempt public, they gratify the curiosity of other individuals.

Biographers have to face the daunting task of dealing with all sorts of diverse material such as letters, diaries, or interviews. Most of them visit the places where their subjects have lived, travel to where they have travelled, read what they have read. This is a way to trace imagine, and finally, to reconstruct the subject's life. The final outcome does not reflect a simple listing of discovered facts, but a series of choices specific to the rendition of the subject by the biographer. This is at the heart of the phenomenon of multiple biographies of the same subject. Each biographer imagines and recreates the subject through the available material. Since no two people interpret the same material in quite the same way, no two recreations are the same. Therefore, there are as many subjects as there are biographies of that subject. The extent of this multiplicity of biographical interpretation should be illustrated in some detail before a discussion of the narrative dynamic between the biographer and the subject is attempted.

Multiple biographies of the English novelist Jane Austen may well be used for this purpose. Since her death in 1817, Jane Austen's life has inspired quite a number of biographical writings. Austen's letters to her sister Cassandra and occasionally to other family members, memoirs, family papers, parish registers and other similar documents are among the standard sources utilized by her biographers, and no

groundbreaking new material has been discovered since William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh published *Jane Austen, Her Life and Letters, A Family Record* in 1913.[1] Yet, since then, each of her subsequent biographers must have felt that the previous biographies lacked in certain aspects, that they somehow failed to present their subject "as she *really* was".

Deeply private and reticent by nature, Jane Austen – the much wondered about "lady" who wrote the greatly admired[2] novels – certainly did not volunteer any information on herself. The first biographical information on the author came out almost as a necessity. One of her older brothers (incidentally, her favourite), Henry Austen felt himself obliged to respond to the many inquiries about the private life of the author after her death. He added a "Biographical Notice of the Author" to the 1817 (title page 1818) posthumous joint publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. In it he describes his sister in the following manner:

> Her stature was that of true elegance. It could not have been increased without exceeding the middle height. Her carriage and deportment were quiet, yet graceful. Her features were separately good. Their assemblage produced an unrivalled expression of that cheerfulness, sensibility, and benevolence, which were her real characteristics. Her complexion was of the finest texture. It might with truth be said, that her eloquent blood spoke through her modest cheek. Her voice was extremely sweet. She delivered herself with fluency and precision. Indeed she was formed for elegant and rational society, excelling in conversation as much as in composition. [...] She had not only an excellent taste for drawing, but, in earlier

[1] This work is a factual record of Austen's life. In 1989, Austen scholar Deirdre Le Faye published a revised and enlarged version titled *Jane Austen, A Family Record*, filling gaps and correcting certain errors.

[2] The Prince Regent kept copies of her novels in each of his residences.

> days, evinced great power of hand in the management of the pencil. [...] She was fond of dancing, and excelled in it. [...] Though the frailties, foibles, and follies of others could not escape her immediate detection, yet even on their vices did she never trust herself to comment with unkindness. Faultless herself, as nearly as human nature can be, she always sought, in the faults of others, something to excuse, to forgive or to forget. She never uttered either a hasty, a silly or severe expression. [...] She was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God, and incapable of feeling it towards any fellow creature. (31-33)

The affectionate brother-as-biographer depicts Austen as the ideal "spinster" sister: elegant, sensible, benevolent, cheerful, dutiful, quiet, accomplished and religious. She appears to be the epitome of perfection very much in line with the norms for unmarried women at the turn of the nineteenth century. Yet, biographical research brings to light the natural fact that not everyone who knew her was so adoring. An old family friend from Hampshire, a Mrs. Milford, remembered Austen at a time when her authorship began to be known. Miss Milford, her daughter, wrote the following in a letter:

> I have discovered that our great favourite Miss Austen is my country-woman; that Mama knew all her family very intimately; and that herself is an old maid (I beg her pardon – I mean a young lady) with whom Mama before her marriage was acquainted. Mama says she was then the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers and a friend of mine who visits her now says that she has stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of "single blessedness" that ever existed, and that till "Pride and Prejudice" showed what a precious gem was hidden in that unbending case, she was no more regarded in society than a poker or a fire screen or any other thin, upright piece

> of wood or iron that fills its corner in peace and quiet. The case is very different now; she is still a poker but a poker of whom everyone is afraid. It must be confessed that this silent observation from such an observer is rather formidable … a wit, a delineator of character, who does not talk is terrific indeed. (W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh, rev. ed. 198-99)

Biographers need to decide what they will do with both the statement of the brother and the statement above. How are they to be reconciled? *Should* they be reconciled? One way is to ignore one of them altogether. Another is to interpret them in a way supporting the biographer's overall picture of the author that will come across in the biography. In her *Only a Novel: The Double Life of Jane Austen* (1972), Jane Aiken Hodge fits Mrs. Milford's "the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly" comment within her vision of Austen living a conforming public life on the one hand and a private creative life on the other. She keeps silent about the rest:

> I like to think that this report might have been superficially correct, though basically false […] what was intended as criticism was in fact high praise. It shows how successfully Jane Austen had embarked on her double life. Young ladies were supposed to be pretty, and silly, and on the catch for husbands. Jane Austen had decided to conform. And as "an artist can do nothing slovenly", she was naturally, the prettiest and silliest of them all. (46)

Hodge ties Mrs Mitford's statement to Austen's own statement on artistry and presents her actions as conscious social choices. Six years later another biographer, Lord David Cecil comments on the Milford letter in his *A Portrait of Jane Austen*:

> On examination these sharp words turn out to have little evidence to support them. For one thing, Mrs. Milford left the

> Steventon district when Jane was only ten years old, so that she can only be speaking on hearsay. For another, the description [...] is at variance with everything else we know about Jane Austen. Whatever false impression she may have made at twelve years old, it is incredible that the grown-up Jane Austen, the Jane Austen who, within a few years, was to create such devastating embodiments of silliness and affectation as Lucy Steele and Isabella Thorpe, should herself have ever appeared as affected, let alone silly. Or husband-hunting; though, like most girls of her age, she probably considered any young man she met in the light of a possible husband. Altogether Mrs. Milford's account must be considered mainly worthless. Personally, I should be sorry to regard it as wholly worthless. I like to think there was a time in Jane Austen's life when she could be called a pretty butterfly. I know of no other women writer of the first rank who has been similarly described. (67)

Although Cecil dismisses the document at first, he cannot keep himself from commenting on it in a way that supports his own vision of the author as a well-adjusted woman who would shun folly in any shape or form. He gives credit to the statement, in the manner of an understanding father, by making the reader imagine a livelier, true-to-life young girl who had the artistic vision as well as the social experience to write the sparkling *Pride and Prejudice*.

The theme of love and marriage is also an important concern for Austen biographers. Since her sister Cassandra burnt the letters that are commonly supposed to include these subjects, and very little else is known about the love life of one of the most successful writers of love, the biographers have to make do with what they have. It is a known fact that the son of a wealthy family friend, Harris Bigg-Wither proposed to Austen. He was accepted. However, the following morning Austen apologized and withdrew her acceptance. This change of

heart – or mind – is easily accepted by female biographers. Elizabeth Jenkins, for example, simply writes, "[when] it came […] to marrying without love, she could not do it" (102). Male biographers, on the other hand, have a harder time accepting her refusal of a wealthy man from a good family at a time in her life when it could have been a much-needed financial and social relief. Park Honan spends six pages justifying the decision and ends up almost apologizing for Austen.

Even the letters that are generally considered reliable can acquire different meanings depending on the way they are read. Austen writes to her sister Cassandra about the book she is planning to write, then says "Now I will try to write of something else, and it shall be a complete change of subject – ordination" (Chapman 298). For a long time, it was thought that Austen was referring to *Mansfield Park* in which Edmund Bertram's ordination carries great import. Scholars commented that Austen was announcing a total change of subject in her new novel, and that her primary concern was ordination. This was considered the standard interpretation. But, later on, a more careful reading of the letter and a closer attention to punctuation revealed that when Austen wrote about the change of subject, she merely meant that she was changing the subject *in her letter*, the ordination she would be writing about was not Edmund Bertram's fictional ordination, but the very factual ordination ceremony of Austen's elder brother James Austen (Honan 336). Biographical researchers can get so excited when they think that they have found new information that they may misread a text.

There are also deliberate misreadings. John Halperin, author of *The Life of Jane Austen*, seems to have started writing with an intention to bring forth a side of Austen many readers do not know existed, and many Austen scholars do not want to accept. This sensationalist approach leads to misquotations such as exchanging 'possible' for the original word 'impossible' while quoting from Henry Austen's "Biographical Notice" (Halperin 5), which reversed the meaning. Halperin wants to emphasize Austen's less than perfect relationship with her

mother. He quotes from Austen's letter to Anne Sharp (Thursday, 22 May 1817) which she wrote during her last illness (344). In this letter, Austen talks about her appreciation of her sister and brothers for their kindness and care during her illness; but Halperin claims that she does not mention her mother. This is presented as proof of the coldness that existed between them even just before Austen's death. In order to prove his point, Halperin conveniently omits this sentence which comes further on in the letter: "I have not mentioned my dear Mother; she suffered much for me when I was at the worst, but is tolerably well. [...] In short, if I live to be an old Woman, I must expect to wish to die now; blessed in the tenderness of such a Family [...]" (Chapman 203). He presents Jane Austen as a bitter, sarcastic, frustrated spinster; the biography is full of words like "pettiness," "nastiness," "mean spiritedness" and "cold-hearted." This is Halperin's Austen.

Which is the *real* Austen? Maybe all or maybe none. Yet one thing is certain: There are as many Austens as there are Austen biographies, and there can be no "definitive biography" except in the blurbs that grace the covers of biographies themselves.

This brief look at the roots of the elusiveness of the subject in biography as a genre reveals that the earlier statement – that there are as many subjects as there are biographies – can be reworded in a way that would put the issue more accurately: there are as many subjects as there are biographers. Access to biographical material is an important factor in the differences between biographies; nevertheless, given exactly the same material to work with, no two biographers will draw the same conclusions. Therefore, the key is the interpretation of the biographer. After all, each attempt at writing the life of a subject is unique in that each carries the imprint of the interpretive and creative faculties of a biographer's mind.

The main interest of this book is the various ways of recreating the "biographical self" in narrative, in other words, the intricate relationship of the biographer with the subject. What exactly does a biographer do when s/he gives shape to a life in a biography? This is a

question widely ignored both by readers and reviewers of biography. Most reviews of biographies in literary magazines and journals – and there are many, since biography is a highly popular genre – ignore the narrative strategies and styles of the biographies as if they were directly looking at the content. But what is content without form? It is biographical form that gives shape to the biographical subject. Without it no illusion of a living and breathing person can be created on paper. The recreation of the biographical subject is a complex endeavour and requires a complex narrative. In contrast to purely fictional forms, biography writing does not allow total freedom to the biographer in the creative act. Ideally, a biography's structure or backbone is formed by accurate historical fact – in that sense, it claims a kinship with history. But its soul lies elsewhere. Since the concern is life, something more is needed. This "something more" is desired both by writers and readers of biography: It is the vivid sense of a lived life; nothing dry, cold or dead, but a well-rounded, vibrant impression of a life that is left in the air after one turns over the last page of a biography of literary value.

Each biographer uses different narrative strategies to create this impression; however, s/he is, once again, unable to exercise total freedom. The use of these narrative strategies cannot be arbitrary. It is dictated by what will be called the "distance" between the biographer and the subject in terms of time and space (Alpers 12). Distance serves as a centre around which the issues of biographer and subject relationship can be discussed. Looking at biography in terms of distance also enables us to divide this diverse genre into three main categories for closer analysis.

In the first category, the distance is close – almost non-existent. The biographer is personally acquainted with the subject and writes the biography either at the time when the subject is alive or not much later than his/her death. In most of these cases the biographers are relatives or close friends of the subject. No matter who they are, they have firsthand knowledge of their subjects and more often than not,

have access to personal documents. Many biographers and readers consider such an acquaintance as an advantage, yet "its accompanying liability of nearly unavoidable bias has almost as often been viewed as a challenge, sometimes even an outright obstacle, to the modern ideal of skeptical objectivity" (Parke 4).

The biographers in the second group are near contemporaries of their subjects. Although they do not know them personally, they "either possess, or [are] equipped to acquire, a thorough understanding of the [...] subject's background and sphere of activities" (Alpers 12).

The biographers in the final category are distinctly removed from their subjects. Let alone knowing them personally, some of them do not even have a chance to know what their subjects look like. Although this might seem like a disadvantage, in certain cases it might actually be a blessing in disguise. Safely removed from the subjects as well as their close relatives and friends, sometimes by hundreds of years, these biographers enjoy a kind of creative freedom away from the watchful eyes of fierce protectors of biographical material whom biographers from the other two categories sometimes have to fight against.

Two biographies from each category are selected for this study. The purpose is firstly, to do at least some justice to the immense variety of the genre; secondly, and more importantly, to illustrate how the approach to the subject and the employment of narrative strategies may vary under similar circumstances. It will be noted that five out of these six biographies are literary biographies in the sense that they are biographies of literary figures. This selection is not deliberate, since the book will not concern itself with any specific or common attribute of the subjects themselves. What is deliberate though is that they all satisfy the second definition of the term: They all are biographies of considerable literary quality.