PART I

Ancient biography revisited

CHAPTER I

Ancient biography and formalities of fiction

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Fictiveness and fiction

'Is there in fact any specific difference between factual and imaginary narrative, any linguistic feature by which we may distinguish on the one hand the mode appropriate to the relation of historical events … and on the other hand the mode appropriate to the epic, novel or drama?' Roland Barthes' (1970: 145) famous question of whether fictional literature is characterized by any formal specificity has triggered varying responses. Some, among them Barthes himself, answer this question in the negative[1] but others, with a view to the inclusion of non-fictional texts as objects of narratological study, have identified a number of textual criteria for fictionality.[2] This book brings this discussion to the field of ancient biographical narrative.

Of course, I do not want to suggest that there is such a thing as *one* mode of writing appropriate to biography (or other so-called 'historical' genres) and another mode appropriate to fiction, as a straightforwardly positive answer to Barthes' question would imply. It has been sufficiently pointed out that the borderline between fiction and non-fiction is permeable in almost all kinds of narrative.[3] In this volume, we are interested in instances that explore the blurred borderline between historicity and fictionality that is commonly accepted, including by ancient writers themselves, to characterize ancient biography (as well as other ancient so-called

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[1] See also Searle (1979: 58–75), who locates the distinctive character of fiction rather in 'extralinguistic, nonsemantic conventions' (66).

[2] See, most notably, Cohn (1999), who is explicit that 'fiction is ruled by formal patterns ruled out in all other orders of discourse' (vii).

[3] An example of such blurring is provided by maxims (*gnômai*/*sententiae*), which in works of fiction introduce pockets of non-fictionality. See Genette (1991: 58–61) and, for the ancient novel, Hägg (1971: 107) and Morgan (1993: 202–203). On maxims in Greek fictional narrative and some of their (problematic) heuristic implications, see Whitmarsh (2003: 193).

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'non-fictional' genres).[4] The earliest representatives of ancient *Lives* contain fictive elements and elements that we now recognize as having later become important markers of ancient novelistic literature. Apart from Xenophon of Athens' routinely cited *Cyropaedia* (fourth century BCE),[5] a number of other (Platonic as well as Xenophontic) writings such as *Apology*, *Phaedo*, *Memorabilia* and *Agesilaus* are also informed, to greater or lesser extents, by modes of writing that had an important role to play in later biographical discourse.[6] Indeed, among so-called non-fictional narrative genres, biography seems particularly conducive to slippages into the realm of fiction. It is not just that in some biographies rhetorical elaboration implies fictionalization[7] because of the work's encomiastic aim[8] (an issue discussed explicitly by ancient biographers[9]). It is also that the general question of heuristic possibility in biography ('how does the narrator know what he is narrating?'[10]) almost naturally implies conjecture, interpretation and reconstruction of actions, private moments, motivations and attitudes.[11] This inevitably causes even modern biography, which much more than its ancient counterpart is unambiguously expected to meet clear and rather rigid standards concerning factual correctness and historicity, to flirt with notions of fiction. In fact, Cohn (1999: 18–37) singles out (modern) biographical narrative as the generic region where factual and fictional narratives come into closest proximity and rightly observes that 'any biographer who goes beyond the mere compilation of vital facts will be more or less concerned with his subject's mental actions and reactions. The question is not *whether* but *how* he will express these concerns' (her italics).[12]

Of course, the field of ancient biography is a broad and highly diversified one, with significant differences between individual biographies

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[4] This book does not cover autobiography, which in a number of ways is significantly different from biography and would need to be placed in a specific context. See Cohn (1999: 30–37) on the radical difference between the two.

[5] See, for example, Mueller-Goldingen (2004: 8) and Holzberg (1996a: 18–28).

[6] See Hägg (2012a: 19–66) for a discussion of biographical modes of discourse in all these texts.

[7] On our use of this term (as different from 'fictiveness') see pp. 12–16 below.

[8] Pernot (1993). On encomiastic description of virtues as conducive to fictionalization in Xen. *Agesilaus*, see Hägg (2012a: 41–51). And see Hägg (2012a: 97) on biography amplifying a selection of achievements and omitting less flattering facts.

[9] See, for example, Gyselinck and Demoen (2009) on Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*, Hägg (2012a: 197–204) on Nicolaus of Damascus' *Life of Augustus*.

[10] On the particular relevance of this question when scenes are documented in great detail, see Hamburger (1957: 21–27) and Genette (1991: 74).

[11] On psychic representation and fictionalization, see pp. 17–18 below.

[12] Cohn (1989: 9–10; 1999: 26). For a similar observation on ancient biography in particular, see Hägg (2012a: 3).

as well as sub-genres. The Greek collective and individual *Lives* of (con-
temporary and historical) intellectuals, for example, are traditionally
considered more imaginative than their political counterparts.[13] And the
fictionalization involved in so-called 'open biographies', such as the *Life
of Aesop* and the *Alexander Romance*, is characterized by an additional
layer of complexity as their segmentary composition is arguably con-
ducive to the omission of some of the historical (or pseudo-historical)
material, the absorption of other material (such as folklore) and the
subordination of internal consistency to the wish to include exciting
stories.[14]

Before contextualizing our approach and documenting it in detail,
we need to give definitions of two concepts that at first sight may seem
deceptively unproblematic. Whereas fiction and fictiveness are often
used as synonyms, this book adopts a distinction.[15] We use the word
'fictive(ness)' as a reference to the truth-value of an account. The term
denotes the lack (or absence) of verifiable, historical and factual accuracy.[16]
Traditionally, what we label as 'fictive' is identified as 'untruth', 'lies',
'fabrication'[17] or 'imagination' and opposed to 'truth'. In this conceptual-
ization, the main criterion is whether or not something actually happened
(or is accepted to have happened) in factual, historical reality. At the same
time the question of verisimilitude is no less important. As is well known,
the combination of these two questions informs the famous and influen-
tial ancient distinction between *fabula* (events that have not taken place
and are not credible; Gr. πλασματικόν, *plasmatikon* or δραματικόν, *dram-
atikon*), *argumentum* (events that have not taken place but are credible;
Gr. μῦθος, *mythos*) and *historia* (events that *have* (or are believed to have)
taken place; Gr. ἱστορία, *historia*).[18] In scholarship on ancient narrative
genres, the opposition between truth and fictiveness was prevalent for a
long time. Momigliano (1993: 46–49), for example, famously complains
that fourth-century biographers never bothered to distinguish reality and

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[13] See, for example, Pelling (2002c: 147–148).

[14] See Hägg (2012a: 99–147, esp. 118).

[15] See Cohn (1999: 2–17) for an overview of various meanings of 'fiction' in different types of
discourse.

[16] In fact, this coincides with what the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (3rd edn, 2010) defines as
'fiction': '2. something that is invented or untrue … A belief or statement which is false, but is
often held to be true because it is expedient to do so.'

[17] See Green (2002: 13) on fabrication in this sense.

[18] The tripartition is first found in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.13 and has been very influential in
ancient and medieval narrative theory. See Green (2002: 3–17), Hägg (2012b: 25–27) and Bréchet,
Videau and Webb (2013: 8–9).

imagination.[19] Along similar lines (but paying attention to truth rather than imagination), others have examined in detail ancient biographies as sources of historical fact (with questions about historicity and source material),[20] cultural history and the history of ideas.[21]

In recent years, significant attempts have been made in historical studies to move beyond this opposition.[22] Our volume presents ways to do so from a literary point of view. Our two main, related assumptions are simple ones and hardly revolutionary: ancient biographies were not meant to be read as hermetically sealed depositories of a 'historical' truth and no simple dichotomy between fact and fictiveness can adequately grasp the complexities of narrative literature. A 'false' account should not necessarily be taken to indicate an author's tendency to 'deceive' an audience by deliberately deviating from a given source (as Bernheim 1889 assumes, who has received some support).[23]

It is in going beyond the distinction between truth and fictiveness that there is some mileage in distinguishing fictiveness from fiction, the latter of which we define as untruth that is intended *not* to be believed as truth but rather to be acknowledged as untruth. In so doing, we follow Green's (2002: 4) definition:

> Fiction is a category of literary text which, although it may also include events that were held to have actually taken place, gives an account of events that could not conceivably have taken place and/or of events that, although possible, did not take place, and which, in doing so, invites the intended audience to be willing to make-believe what would otherwise be regarded as untrue.[24]

Crucial to fiction, then, is the contractual relationship between its sender (the author, storyteller, etc.) and recipient (the reader, listener, etc.).[25]

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[19] See also Barnes (2010: 153) on 'authentic documents' and 'bogus documents' in hagiography; Murray (1946: 13) on Satyrus' 'indifference to historical fact' in the *Life of Euripides*; Bollansée (1999b: xiii) on Hermippus' unbounded credulity, deliberate mendacity and malicious inventions (with more balanced judgements in Bollansée (1999b: 117–187); and Wehrli (1974: 102–107), both cited by Hägg (2012a: 88)). Often, but not in our book, fictiveness in this sense is labelled as 'fiction': see, for example, Momigliano (1993: 56–57) on the need of biographers to resort to (what he calls) fiction and Hägg (2012a: 4) on the distinction between historicity/fact and (what he calls) fiction.

[20] See, for example, Fairweather (1974) and Barnes (2010).

[21] See, for example, Swain (1997). For a recent state of the art about notions of truthfulness, realism and historicity in hagiographical writings, see Turner (2012: 8–22).

[22] Turner (2012) is a good example.

[23] See, for example, Barnes (1997).

[24] Similarly, Morgan (2015: 186–187) defines fiction as 'untruth not intended to deceive, acknowledged as untruth by sender and recipient'.

[25] For a comparable, contractual approach to the notion of genre rather than fiction, see Adams (2013: 1–5).

Agapitos and Boje Mortensen (2012: 15) argue that such a contractual
approach establishes fiction by definition as a very fluid and relative
concept:

> there are no inherent traits in a text which make it fictional (and exactly the
> same text can, in principle, be historical for one audience and fictional for
> another), nor is the inventiveness of the author of relevance. It all resides
> in a contract between author/storyteller and a specific audience (in practice
> the contract often has to be decoded from the text and intertexts if clear
> extratextual evidence is missing).

However, as we will see, in some cases it is precisely this contract that
seems to be inextricably bound up with, dependent on and negotiated by
such 'inherent traits'. We will refer to such traits as 'techniques of fiction-
alization'; rather than at once making an entire text fictional, they often
exert a fictionalizing impact that is much more transient or local, as we
will see (pp. 14–25).

Fiction and biography

A fundamental quality of fiction is what Cohn (1999: 9–17) characterizes
as its *non-referentiality* or *self-referentiality*. This characterization hinges
on the insight that 'a work of fiction itself creates the world to which it
refers by referring to it' (Cohn 1999: 13). Unlike non-fictional narrative,
fictional narratives do not *need* to refer to an extratextual reality – they
can be solely self-referential.[26] Of course, they more often than not do
make reference to extra-literary realities (for example by setting charac-
ters and events in well-known or recognizable places) and therefore adopt
what Harshaw (1984: 249) characterizes as a 'double-decker' model of ref-
erence: an internal frame (for example, the fictional, strictly self-referential
events that happen to Callirhoe and Chaereas in Chariton's novel) nested
within an external frame (for example, the cities of Syracuse, Miletus and
Babylon, where much of Chariton's action is set).

The ancient biographies discussed in this book, even those commonly
accepted to be fictional such as the *Life of Aesop* (Karla, Chapter 3) and
the pseudo-Hippocratic letters (Knöbl, Chapter 15), differ from 'pure' fic-
tion precisely by their *in*ability to be solely self-referential. Just like other
kinds of referential narrative, such as historiography, they inevitably refer,
at least to some extent, to a preceding tradition of existing material, even

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[26] See also MacDonald (1954: 176) and Margolin (1991: 520).

if this material is of a legendary rather than a factual, historical kind.[27]
The difference between referentiality and non-referentiality comes into
particularly sharp focus when we turn to an area central to biographical
writing: its characters, the so-called biographees.[28] Purely fictional charac-
ters (such as Apuleius' Lucius, for example) have to or can be constructed
out of nothing by a narrator: they do not exist before their invention in
a specific literary work. This means, first, that their life-spans are well
delineated. As Margolin (2007: 67) puts it, Cervantes' Don Quixote 'was
born when the text bearing his name was written down, and will go on
living as long as at least one copy of it remains and at least one person
reads it'. It also means that fictional characters are exactly as a narrator
(or multiple narrators within the same work) depicts them. Margolin
(2007: 68) argues that, since texts are finite, textually created characters
are 'radically incomplete' as regards the number and nature of the proper-
ties ascribed to them: 'Generally, which (kinds of) properties are specified
or not and how many are a function of the text's length and of the author's
artistic method. Some authors are sparing on physical details, while others
provide no access to characters' minds.' Even if Margolin's claim is a fair
one (any given narrative will never be able to explore *all* potentially inter-
esting aspects of a character), I think that the notion of 'incompleteness'
in this context is problematic from a logical point of view. By definition,
it implies its opposite and, indeed, makes sense only if we have an idea
of what this opposite is. In the case of fictional, purely self-referential
characters, this clearly is *not* the case: there is no such thing as a 'com-
plete' version of a fictional character other than the version depicted in
the narrative. The reason is, of course, that all characteristics that one can
possibly think of but with which the author has been 'sparing' are sim-
ply not part of this character. It is impossible to tell what these charac-
teristics are because they exist nowhere, and to imply that they do (for
example by labelling the sum of what *is* included in a narrative as 'incom-
plete') is, logically speaking, incorrect. Therefore, I would suggest that the
depiction of fictional characters may very well be semantically limited in

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[27] See, for example, Kivilo (2010), who explores traditional material clustering around the lives of
early Greek poets and its development over time. From a theoretical point of view, see Cohn
(1999: 15) and Scholes (1980: 211), the latter of whom aptly comments that 'the producer of a his-
torical text affirms that the events entextualized did indeed occur before entextualization. Thus it
is quite proper to bring extratextual information to bear on those events when interpreting and
evaluating a historical narrative … It is certainly otherwise in fiction, for in fiction the events may
be said to be created by and with the text. They have no prior temporal existence.'

[28] See, for example, Hägg (2012a: 13–14) on the importance of character depiction in biography ever
since the oldest representatives of the genre.

any given narrative but nevertheless is always *complete*: any self-referential character is, by definition, solely what is communicated about him/her, explicitly or implicitly, by a/the narrator(s). (Certainly, readers are continuously invited to construct portraits of such characters and fill in gaps in their knowledge through interpretation and inference, but such readerly activity will need to be supported by information conveyed, more or less explicitly, *within* the limited space of the narrative.)

In all these respects, biographees are clearly different. They are not usually creations out of nothing but historical or legendary characters who at the moment of literary fixation already exist *outside* the text in various other cultural registers. Consequently, although their real, factual life-spans are well delineated (they are born and, in the case of ancient *Lives*, have usually died before their biographies are committed to paper),[29] their literary life-spans cannot be simply defined because they are usually already documented to a greater or lesser extent by historical, literary and other cultural traditions before becoming the object of biographies. Unlike fictional characters, therefore, biographees are never solely as narrators depict them within a given text because, quite simply, in biography the act of reference does not coincide with the act of creation. Not only can there be conflicting versions of one and the same biographee,[30] but biographees can also fade from public interest or new biographies can replace, supplement and/or correct outdated ones.[31] Moreover, the representation of biographees will also never be as complete as the presentation of fictional characters: a biographer is unlikely (or even unable) to cover all aspects of a biographee's character and achievements entirely and exhaustively.[32] Paradoxically, then, depictions of fictional characters are, by definition, *more* complete than those of non-fictional characters.

Since the depiction of any biographee is, at least to some extent, determined by historical information and/or cultural traditions bearing upon him/her, biographers cannot simply invest their biographees with whatever characteristics they like (as inventors of fictional characters can) but

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[29] Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Martin of Tours*, written while its hero was still alive, is an exception. See Praet in this volume and Barnes (2010: 215).

[30] The arguably most famous ancient example is Socrates, whose importance for the ancient biographical tradition is dealt with by Beck and Robiano in this volume. See Hägg (2012a: 75–76) on different versions of this figure in Aristoxenus, Xenophon and Plato.

[31] See, for example, Hägg (2012a: 69) on Aristoxenus' *Life of Pythagoras* and biography being 'notoriously ephemeral'.

[32] It can even be argued, as Hägg (2012a: 40) does, that in ancient biography especially, where character often has a clear moral function, too many personal and individualized traits would diffuse any clear moral message.

configure their depictions by tapping into pre-existing traditions. Good
examples in this volume are discussed by Christy and Knöbl: both deal
with ways in which a biographical narrative (in Knöbl's case a tale of two
people rather than one) is built up through letters, invites readers to fill
interpretative gaps and exploits their pre-existing knowledge of great clas-
sical figures (Plato and Xenophon in Christy's chapter, Hippocrates and
Democritus in Knöbl's). And both show how the popularity of these fig-
ures at the time of writing affects the narrative layout. While Barthes, as
we have seen in the opening paragraph, opposes 'non-factual' types of
discourse such as novels and drama to what he considers to be a factual
'relation of historical events', this book takes as one of its starting points
the idea that the task of narrators of such 'factual' discourse in biogra-
phies is, in fact, *similar* to that of, say, ancient tragedians, who also build
their particular versions of Oedipus or Achilles amidst a wealth of avail-
able traditional material about these figures.[33] Whereas in the case of
ancient tragedians this material is mostly of a mythological nature, it is
more likely to be historiographical or legendary in biographical narra-
tives as these often address the (precision of the) reader's documentation
and knowledge about the biographee on the basis of external, factual and
often conflicting source material.[34]

Of course, not all biographies work like this. There are also acknowl-
edged fictions cast in the form of biographies such as Borges' *Universal
History of Infamy* and Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,
which are built around purely fictional characters. These biographies
deal with characters whose ontological status is more like that of novel-
istic heroes such as Chariton's Chaereas and Petronius' Encolpius than
that of fellow-biographees such as Philostratus' Apollonius or Plutarch's
or Ps.-Callisthenes' Alexander. Such narratives are accommodated by
Cohn's (1999: 18–30) distinction between 'biography' (of a real person; e.g.
Strachey, *Queen Victoria*) and 'fictional biography' (of an invented per-
son, e.g. Tolstoy, *Ivan Ilyich*). Another category, finally, is fictional biog-
raphy of *historical* people, which *is* concerned with referential characters
but does not necessarily relate them to existing traditions. Instead, read-
ers can choose to take the characters' lives, like those of novel heroes, to
be wholly contained within the single text. This occurs in the modern
world with works such as Allan Massie's *Tiberius* and Hilary Mantel's
Wolf Hall, which arguably do not *require* (but may still very well invite,

[33] See Hägg and Rousseau (2000: 13–14) on biographers as dramatists.
[34] See, for example, Hahn (1989).