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Cosby on Ní Dhúill, 'Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography'

Caitríona Ní Dhúill took on a monumental task in this book, as she makes the case for the theoretical concept of “metabiography” while engaging with English and German historiography about biography. Yet she is successful in many of her goals, particularly in starting a conversation about the methodological undertakings of biography and the ways in which history, fiction, and literature intersect in the many forms biography can take. From the beginning Ní Dhúill acknowledges the eclecticism of her sources and notes that this is in part to avoid cultural and linguistic essentialism. She also raises the question of why biography is so late to the “meta” game, when fields such as fiction and history have been adopting the terminology for many years. Throughout the book Ní Dhúill asks many questions about the connection of “meta” and “biography,” but leaves room for the reader to draw their own conclusions from the evidence that she presents from German and English sources, and from the reader’s own experience with biography.

Not exclusively privileging English-language biographical studies is one of Ní Dhúill’s most interesting methodological approaches in this book. She states that there are different cultural approaches to biographical writing but that metabiography asserts these differences enhance the field, rather than create internal divisions. Her evidence across mostly German- and English-language sources appears to support this claim but, as she states at the beginning of the book, these examples are selected from a plethora of possibilities. These sources are chosen to highlight the differences between English and German understandings of biography and life writing. In some parts, Ní Dhúill’s choice of language and translation is complicated and impenetrable, particularly for those who do not speak German. Although bilingual studies do enrich our understanding of the field, and may even become more common when it comes to the future of biography, it is difficult for those of us who are not fluent in German to assess the validity of many of these evidentiary sources.

The book’s central thesis is that metabiography is the self-reflective, overarching theory which can join the many forms of life writing into a unified biographical practice for both reading and writing biography. As Ní Dhúill states (and many biographers would agree), reflection on the nature of biography is a time-honored tradition: biographers always ponder their relationship with
their subject, as one cannot avoid some sort of entanglement with the subject’s life. All biographers make choices to center certain “storylines” and to omit others. The concept of writing a comprehensive story of anyone’s life is daunting and wholly impossible, even for the most skilled biographer. However, not all biographers are explicit in their reasoning for these decisions and organizational principles. Whether the author intends it or not, every biography has a “hero” or “protagonist.” The heroic model has been ingrained in the very roots of biography as a genre. Modern biographers avoid the heroic model, but “metabiography traces new pathways through established biographical discourses in order to develop investments of biography” (pp. 23-24). Ní Dhúill advocates that the self-aware metabiographer reads biographies to understand and engage with the larger theoretical questions of the field of biography and life writing.

Ní Dhúill’s choice to engage with writing beyond the strict boundaries of the genre of history allows the reader to also expand the possibilities with which a metabiographical approach can benefit historical writing. One of the ways which biography as a field has been classified as unusual is “the longstanding conception of biography as a hybrid genre of fiction and historiography” (p. 4). This connection is why Ní Dhúill engages with historical and fictional life writing in her later chapters. Some historians may shy away from the inclusion of fiction and literature in her definition of metabiography. But this is a very interesting approach, especially considering the roots of biographical writings. These roots are closely connected to fiction, or even a meeting of fiction and history in the retelling of the lives of saints, kings, and other “great men” in history, which have significantly influenced the field. Ní Dhúill encourages scholars to read more biographies as a way of evaluating using new methodological practices. A metabiographical approach insists that the biography and the biographical novelist engage with similar issues, and similar writing processes, particularly in their attempts to show the subject’s “personality.” She also connects biography to art and portraiture, discusses the sometimes-haphazard use of images of subjects in biographical texts, and calls for authors to consider how they interpret pictures and visual materials. She suggests that every image chosen in a text adds to the personality, and overall narrative, that the biographer is attempting to convey to the reader.

This discussion leads to Ní Dhúill’s larger metabiographical question: how the relationship of public to private is understood and framed in biography. As the biographer attempts to convey a personality, and a narrative storyline, to their reader, it is important to question the “authenticity” of the subject’s “private” life through their own retelling. Is it even possible for a biographer to understand this private life? That question haunts all biographical (and metabiographical) works. Though Ní Dhúill raises these essential questions, the answers she provides are framed as only her thoughts on the topic, once again leaving space for the reader to add to the discussion about “authenticity” and that ever-present search for historical “truth.”

Ní Dhúill also engages with feminist thought and gender theory in her later chapters, though these themes are present throughout the entirety of the book. She questions how biographers present their subject as inherently gendered, and what understandings of gender identity and difference underlie their portrayals of subjects. No genre of biographical or other type of writing is gender-neutral, and assumptions about how gender is experienced overtly or covertly color every biographical text. This reminder is so important for all biographers, as we all need to confront our own assumptions and biases, which shape our understanding of our subjects.

There are some limitations to the analysis in this book. Ní Dhúill acknowledges numerous times that this is only a very broad overview of biographical sources and historiography, because the breadth of the topic does not allow for much detail
or nuance to be discussed. Her own note about the limitations of her analysis is part of the reflexive nature of the metabiographer, part of the methodology she is advocating throughout the book. This leaves room for further discussion and rebuttal from other biographers and historians about the concept of metabiography, which is the author’s goal from the beginning. Though Ní Dhúill asks many questions about biography and suggests some theoretical origins for metabiography, she does not present a single, unifying definition of what metabiography “is” or how it should be done. Instead, she delves into a detailed exploration of the methods and the historiography of several well-known biographies and considers how they influenced (and did not influence) each other, but ends the book without a concluding chapter, instead choosing to leave much for future exploration and debate.

This book serves an important purpose, as many historians are hesitant to discuss theory and method when it comes to historical practice, whereas biographers often feel the need to be explicit about their theory and method, as their writing is sometimes seen as less “scholarly” than other types of writing more commonly found in the field of history. But when it comes to defining historical studies, methodology and theory is often murky at best. For all of us historians out there, it is essential to read this book with the knowledge that this is not only a historical analysis: it goes beyond the traditional confines of the field to look at fiction, literature, and even pictorial imagery and imagination. This leaves the reader with a few questions. Ní Dhúill advocates making metabiography into a distinct field, but is there a benefit to creating the label of metabiography? Who benefits from this distinct categorization? Ní Dhúill makes her own argument for the field of metabiography but leaves it up to the reader to decide for themselves—as do I.
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