

Hybridised Genres: Accessing Spaces Conventional Biography Cannot Reach

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Abstract

To understand the proliferation of works navigating biography/fiction intersections, Nigel Hamilton (2016) suggests “[i]nterviewing fiction-writers who’ve gone down this path”. Being a fiction-writer and an academic, I examine the biography/fiction nexus from both perspectives, using the praxis of writing *Between Two Eternities* (Kay 2000), my (auto) biography/semi-fictionalisation of a premature baby. Harnessing verifiable primary sources – concurrent daily diaries/medical notes – it embraces conventional biographical rubric, obeying Hermione Lee’s “Ten rules for biography” (2008). Yet the invented infant “voice”, recording the child’s perceptions, uses adult language, rendering it semi-fictional. Saunders suggests that Sassoon, writing the semi-fictional *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* “needed to view himself as a character in a novel, in order to write about his experiences” (2010: 6). Like Sassoon, I found conformist biography inadequate, therefore I used hybridised modes, permitting me to process/narrate a life, which otherwise defies expression. A case-study of process rather than product, this is an investigation into literary praxis in a plethoral, fragmentary and highly mutable culture.

Key-words: biofiction, hybridisation, intergeneric.

1. Introduction

The historical fiction writer, Hilary Mantel, in a BBC Reith lecture, called herself “one of the foot soldiers, one of the practitioners” (2017). Both practitioner and researcher, straddling the creative/academic divide, she contributes to literary discourse from a creative perspective. Like Mantel, I locate my work across boundaries: I’m an academic and practising novelist/screenwriter; and I often position my work across the nexus where fact meets fiction, in the spaces between autobiography, biography, memoir and fiction.

From an academic perspective, an understanding of authorial process and motivation is elusive, relying on assumption and hypothesis difficult to defend. Indeed, even creative writers might be unclear about the nuanced, complex and often instinctive decision-making process of their (auto)biographical fiction. However, writers are clear about certain and specific intentions, and in this case authorial self-reflection is a valuable contribution to literary discourse. I will therefore analyse my stated, conscious intentions behind the writing of my hybridised narrative, *Between Two Eternities*, to examine the decisions made, particularly concerning the modes of communication, the genres fused, and the subsequent plural nature of the work.

Between Two Eternities recounts ‘real’ lives, specifically the life of the narrator: premature baby, Saul. It is written entirely from Saul’s perspective, using an invented infant-adult narrative voice. Part memoir/documentary, part magic-realism, part authorial self-exploration, it utilises tropes of biography, autobiography, memoir, medical record and novel, melding a premature baby’s imagined consciousness and responses, with the certifiable raw data of his lived experience. An example of “intergeneric hybridisation” (Paget 1998: 10), it is an experimental exploration of (auto)biography’s fictional possibilities, merging genres to create a hybridised narrative which doesn’t fit neatly into the categories the publishing industry/literary critics seek to impose.

Written in 2000, it is part of a contemporary profusion of multi-generic texts, characterised by the blurring of borders between fact and fiction, and the interaction between literary fiction, biography and autobiography.

2. Intergeneric hybridised narratives: context and classification

For Kate Mitchell, the blurring of generic form is not anything new. She writes that history in the romantic period was largely a “mingling of historical narrative and fictional techniques” (Mitchell 2001: 15), which “had a firmly philosophical purpose, functioning to enlighten and instruct the present” (p. 25). Autobiographical novels of Dickens or Brontë, or pseudo-autobiographical fictions such as *Robinson Crusoe*, demonstrate that creative practitioners do not always respect genre boundaries. A defiance of genre boundaries

encouraged the deliberate interaction of fact/fiction/biography/autobiography in Virginia Woolf's experimental *Flush* (1933) and Gertrude Stein's radical and playful *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933).

However, the recent escalation of encounters between fact and fiction, between biography, autobiography and imaginative material, goes beyond previous individual attempts to manipulate or break form. It is a cultural step-change, a rich and multi-faceted literary phenomenon of multi-media, multi-genre expression. Take, for example, the sudden cluster of biographical novels using Henry James as their subject, including David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2005), Coetzee's *Youth* (2003) and Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2005). Michael Lackey refers to Lodge's astonishment that fictionalising a historical character has become possible for a novelist. "For Lodge, something changed in our cultural thinking that has made the biographical novel not just possible, but also a dominant literary form" (Lackey 2016: 8).

This change in "cultural thinking" has provided contexts in which "intergeneric hybridisation" thrives, inciting the creation and approval of works such as the media-manipulating, self-ironic *Reality Hunger* by David Shield (2010: 70) who denounces genres, as 'low-security prisons', adverse to creative production; or Karl Ove Knausgard's pseudo-novels (2013-2016), which take the autobiographical form to the extreme, allowing inter-textual observation of the fictional nature of his work. Unlike Stein's work, positioned in opposition to mainstream literature, the works of Shield and Knausgard are bestsellers, considered international 'sensations'. They are not part of an avant-garde movement, but represent a shift of influence across contemporary cultural expression. For the mainstream 21st century writer all generic devices are available for exploitation, within a single text. (Auto)biographical evidence, documentary fact and historical data are now part of the toolbox for fictional writers, to explore the preoccupations of our times.

The cultural transformation towards hybridisation has taken place not only within literature but across other textual, non-textual and digital platforms. David Paget's analysis of hybridisation in the TV industry is therefore relevant to current discourse. He writes, "It is not only a case of documentary borrowing, or appropriating dramatic codes and conventions, drama has also been enlivened by its equal and opposite appropriation of documentary and factual codes" (Paget

1998: 10). Writers of all formats, then, feel empowered to appropriate from any genre which suits their purpose, exploiting opportunities provided by both conventional and unconventional modes.

A further observation of the change in cultural context is the unprecedented increase in works which allow for, or even exploit, self-exposure. The 21st century has seen the rise of self-narration/self-confession made possible by the ease of blog creation, image-capture, and immediate dissemination. Textual, visual and digital self-portraits are now part of the fabric of social communication and published instantaneously on public platforms. This goes beyond the motivations of memoirists/autobiographical writers of the past. At one level, *Between Two Eternities* appears to take advantage of this change towards self-exposure. However, my motivation for using my personal life in a work of fiction/non-fiction was not in response to the rise in self-exposing expression, but because the subject of the book demanded it; the story which needed to be told was that of my son, Saul, and I could not dislocate myself from it. However, I chose a pseudo-memoir narrative mode, voiced by Saul, so any self-exposure of me, the author, is displayed tangentially, mediated through Saul's voice. For instance, he describes the first time he is held by his mother thus: "And for the first time, she's calm, really deep-down calm. Everything is going to be alright and she believes it. It's like we've just been through a terrible storm with thunder and gales and snow and ice, and now it's over and the sun has come out" (Kay [2000] 2013: 162). By positioning this story as 'real', I must declare my own relationship with the material and the protagonist, and therefore (reluctantly) accept the autobiographical elements within it.

Another change in 'cultural thinking' is the response of the audiences/readers. If the works of intergeneric hybridisation are multi-faceted, so too must be reader/audience expectations and reactions. Readers/audiences are now highly skilled at de-coding culture, considering several conflicting constructs at once, seeing layers of meaning and irony within juxtapositional structures. Paget (1998: 3) observes that modern audiences "seem to have become more comfortable with, and increasingly interested in, the ironizing play-off between fact and fiction". Simple binary perceptions of fact/fiction no longer constrain the dominant form.

Paget examines the sub-textual signifiers in hybrid works. "They offer a form 'not docu/not drama' that offers an experience through

which audiences are challenged to reconstruct their mental model of the real through codes *both* documentary *and* dramatic” (Paget 1998: 3). This challenge to the audience, to construct their own model, to decode juxtapositional signifiers, incites deeper audience engagement with the material. Assessing the genres against one another in creative processes highlights properties of the material unrealised in a singular generic form.

Paget implies that modern audiences are sophisticated enough to hold opposing but parallel constructs in mind: “Docudrama points beyond the realm of fiction to a realm of non-fiction that is already-lived” (p. 3). Writers who intersect fact and fiction are pointing to a “realm” beyond both fiction and reality, to another mode, where stories/issues are explored in a diverse way; and the creation of these other “realms” has led to a lively discourse seeking to identify suitable taxonomies.

Hybridised narrative, by which writers exploit multifarious overlaps of genre, does not allow for simplistic categorisation; it is not easy to untangle the separate components of works which are multifaceted, multi-intentional, and multi-coded, the genres so inter-dependent.

Between Two Eternities certainly provided a challenge of categorisation for both critic and publisher. The British/Australian publishers classified it non-fiction; the US/Canadian publishers placed it firmly on the “literary novel” shelves. The disagreement resulted in decisions for it to be sold with different titles in different territories: *Between Two Eternities* in the UK and *Saul* in USA/Canada. Even today it defies simple classification. It shifts from page to page along the boundaries between genres, resisting taxonomy; and this uncertainty over categorisation is now considered a literary strength, pointing to a profound change facing publishers and literary critics in the 21st century. Despite efforts to categorise such works, the plural and fluid nature of current literary output, and the plethora of publications on today’s diasporic media platforms, renders classification almost unmanageable, and perhaps redundant.

3. Authorial Intention

Some critics (Lackey 2016; Kendall 1967) have tried to define fact/fiction hybrids in terms of writerly intention, by making binary

assumptions: that the author has chosen either a non-fictional or a fictional model. What this position assumes is that an author's primary intention is to fit their work neatly within genre boundaries. I had many intentions when I wrote *Between Two Eternities*, but fitting within genre boundaries was not one of them.

Jerome de Groot is aware of the multiplicity and diversity of authorial intention when he suggests a long list of motivational factors driving historical fiction, including, "to open up multiple spaces for reflection and dissidence [...], to challenge mainstream and repressive narratives [...], to 'write back', to explore the dissonance and displacement between then and now, making the past recognisable but simultaneously authentically unfamiliar" (de Groot 2009: 2). For de Groot authorial intention is complex and diverse, creating a multiplicity of intention, not only within the subset of hybridised literature, but also within a single text.

My own intentions, when writing *Between Two Eternities*, were multifarious. I wanted to give voice to a human being who had never had a voice, and whose emotional/sensate/intellectual life (although not his medical details) had gone unrecorded; I wanted to illuminate the world of neonatal intensive care, which at that point had not been effectively illuminated; I wanted to revisit my son's life to make sense of it, to reach back and communicate with him; I wanted to explore the nature of life, and death, because the cradle-to-grave experience of a baby provides particular poignancy; I wanted to perceive these universal and important issues through the eyes of a child who lived in a liminal space, just born, and yet permanently on the edges of death; I wanted to delve into the experience of being a premature baby, because an understanding of this experience, of what he felt, sensed and thought, often seemed to be absent from his care; I wanted to ask questions about the way we treat babies, the way we make assumptions about how they are experiencing the world. And I wanted to do all this in the most effective way I could, which meant, during the authorial process, that I had to engage with whatever modes or genres were needed to achieve my objective.

Multiplicity of intention is one of the factors leading to multiplicity of genre. I instinctively felt (and it was an instinctive, creative decision, rather than considered or academic) that a simple biographical treatment would not supply me with the tools or the fabric I needed for this complex and emotionally problematic task.

It was problematic for many reasons, not least because I was trying to access something almost unknowable; my intention was to process and explain the intangible, that which is impossible to process and explain. De Groot points out that when the biographical/historical/factual is merged with the fictional, a writer might be trying “to interpret and render a version of something which is innately other and unknown” (2009: 113). De Groot’s comments illustrate that hybridised literature is more than a merging of the properties of literary styles for the sake of it. The process is a response to the difficulty of mediating elusive, unquantifiable material. My challenge was to access the experience of someone who cannot speak. My decision to engage with multiple genres was forced by the struggle to narrate this life-story in all its emotionally painful complexity. For instance, the moment Saul died, a verifiable fact, yet on another level, entirely unknowable, is expressed in a fictional mode: “I’m standing on top of the mountain. On tiptoe. Ready to jump. Scared but excited. Jittery with energy. I am ready” (Kay 2013: 243).

This leads me to suggest that it is not just the unknowability of material which necessitates complex modes, it is also the personal, painful nature of material. It is interesting to consider Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), here. A fictionalised ‘biography’ of ‘George Sherston’, it quotes from Sassoon’s own diaries written in the trenches, so in one sense it is a ‘memoir’ legitimised by autobiographical material. Yet Sassoon wrote those ‘real’ diary entries, in the third person, as if to distance himself from the traumatic material he was witnessing. Max Saunders (2010: 6) suggests that Sassoon “needed to view himself as a character in a novel, in order to write about his experiences”. In the ‘fictionalised memoir’ these quotes are rewritten, put into the first person, re-fictionalised, to render them more autobiographical. This manipulation of material, progressing it through several fictionalising processes, was deemed necessary by Sassoon, whether consciously or unconsciously, to express a ‘truth’ too difficult and too complex for simple treatments. Sassoon required this tangled relationship between biography and autobiography to communicate a complex and painful experience. My manipulation of material stemmed from a similar position: I used a complex, multi-various form, not as a postmodern act, but because the intense, challenging material required intense and challenging modes of expression.

4. Accessing ‘the truth’ through fact and fiction

A characteristic of Postmodernism is an acknowledgment that fiction is at play in fact-based texts. The question of what can be considered ‘real’ or ‘true’ has been discussed not only by philosophers like Sartre and Ricoeur, but by practical writers themselves, for whom ‘truth’ has proved to be fluid and fragile. As Mantel (2017) said, “Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, though they are part of it – information is not knowledge”. Mantel, practitioner of mainstream literature, thus exhibits an awareness of the “inherent fragility of history” (de Groot 2009: 10), an issue for anyone processing biographical material.

The difficulties of accessing and expressing what is ‘true’ were pertinent to my struggle when writing *Between Two Eternities*. Positioning the story as ‘true’ was important: it was the story of a life, which had not been given adequate articulation, so I wanted to express it with as much integrity, accuracy and sensitivity as possible. I was aware of the problematic nature of accessing that ‘truth’. Several critics have argued that ‘reality’ is already mediated, transformed, by the act of expression and memorialisation, and Kate Mitchell (2010: 24) clarifies this: “The primary sources have not simply mediated the past but have always already interpreted it, and the historian’s narrative, constructed from these textual remains, is itself an interpretation of it”.

Despite this known limitation of primary sources, I was determined to find ways to communicate the verifiable facts contained in those sources, to convey all demonstrable evidence for the reader, and thus point to the ‘truth’ of Saul’s experience, even if partial. I wanted to establish that this is not a novel, a portrait of a fictional human being, but that Saul is a person who lived a ‘real’ life. I therefore took the decision that although biography/history/non-fiction is inherently unstable I would apply biographical methodology. I could not have encountered Hermione Lee’s rules of biography (2008: 6-7) at the time, but I instinctively applied them, incorporating verifiable medical details, and making painstaking reference to primary sources such as concurrent parental diaries, to provide clear signage that this story was based on truth. In hindsight, all of Lee’s ten rules, apart from one, concerning objectivity, an elusive rule anyway, have been rigorously obeyed.

I was meticulous, then, with verified fact. Where verified fact was available, I included it. No invention or distortion of provable data was acceptable as part of my authorial methodology. Primary sources such as the parental diaries, written at the side of his incubator every day of his life, hospital medical notes, and observations recorded by medical staff were integrated into the text, albeit with an understanding of the limitations of such sources (concurrent diaries, although immediate testimony, were subjective and written in extremis; medical notes, often written hurriedly, might be subject to errors, or even written to hide medical mistakes; observed behaviour of the baby was filtered through adult consciousness). Despite being partial evidence, these primary sources were an important certifiable conduit to the past, to the “truth” of Saul’s experience.

Discussing the motivation for writers who use fiction to narrate ‘real’ events and people, Paget refers to Paul Greengrass, a director of documentary-films, biopics, and *Bloody Sunday* (2002), a landmark fact/fiction hybrid. Greengrass points out the value of fictional modes within documentary film-making: “Storytelling is very limited in documentary. Drama offered more texture, a fuller picture” (Paget 1998: 195). As with other genre-hybrids, a “fuller” picture is one of the benefits of using fiction within factual material. “Fuller” might mean that the views of marginalised players are given a voice; in Saul’s case, it gave a voice to someone who never had a voice. It might mean facts which cannot be completely accessed can be implied partially. When fact is elusive, imagination might fill in the gaps, to good effect.

“Fuller” also means that writers can find a way to access and express the *emotional* content of the material. As Paget notes (1998: 195), “the concept of the ‘fuller picture’ draws the belief that *feeling* is a crucial component to *knowing* for a popular audience”. Although “knowing” is often associated with provable facts, here Paget is suggesting that “feeling” also contributes to “knowing.” My need to retrieve “feeling” and “knowing” for Saul’s story led me to incorporate fiction within factual modes. To understand his experience, it was necessary to fill in the gaps. There was very limited factual evidence about how he *felt*; his ability to express feelings was severely restricted, so the interpretation and communication of his inner world, his emotional journey, the “feeling” part of his

experience, which to me was very important, required fictional literary devices. “Oh what a sea of feelings I had to play in”, the baby says, remembering Thursday 11th April, two days before he was born (Kay 2013: 163). It is a fictional, imaginative leap, yet underpinned with an accurate date, conveying actual incidents which happened and can be factually verified.

Jerome de Groot argues that fiction can access ‘truth’ in a way fact-based work cannot. “Fictionalising about history is a more honest way of creating a narrative about something which is essentially unknowable. In some ways, the novelist’s ability to generalise [...] allows them to communicate something more profound than the historian ‘confined to individual incident’” (de Groot 2009: 112). Paget too sees the benefits of merging both modes: documentary enhances drama with its “promise of privileged access to information and to actuality”, whilst drama brings the “promise of emotional understanding through ‘second-order’ experience” (Paget 1998: 12). The tension between fiction and non-fiction is not oppositional; both are of value and contribute to the expression and understanding of a life in different ways.

Another element of “feeling” to consider here is sensation. Our understanding of life is often rendered not only in our emotions, but in our senses. It seemed to me that filling in the gaps in terms of sensation was even more important in relation to a neonate in an incubator, for whom sensation must have been intense, and more primary than thought. Thus, I drew the reader into Saul’s sensate experience by beginning with an imagined scenario whereby he was floating on the ceiling, looking down at a “frog baby” in an incubator. This allowed me to deliver a visual world for the reader, described by Saul. Once this was established, Saul entered the intensity of physical sensation: “Everything begins to swirl and fizz. Now it’s only voices, noises, and the nasty feel of fingers prodding. The frog baby must be breathing hard, Suckpush. Suckpush. The frog baby is me” (Kay 2013: 8).

Intertwining the elements of fact, emotions, thoughts and sensation within the fabric of the story, seemed to be a “fuller” way to approach Saul’s story, than with simple “fact” alone. So, the medical world (verifiable facts often rendered through words he hears) crashes into his stream of consciousness. “I dance with my legs today and wave my arms about to the music I am making

in my head. I go *Duddle doo duddle duddle doo duddle dooooo*, full of bounce this morning. ‘And what’s indomethacin?’ ‘It’s to try to close the arterial duct in his heart’” (p. 63).

There are two other significant ways in which fiction encounters the non-fictional within the book: the narrator’s voice and Saul’s flights of fancy.

I decided that to allow the reader to get as close to Saul’s emotional experience as possible, the narrator must be Saul himself, not me, not the mother-author. Yet a baby has no language. A voice based on the ‘real’ linguistic abilities of a neonate would not have provided access to Saul’s experience; therefore, the constructed voice, although invented, allowed for a ‘fuller’, more ‘truthful’ expression. Of course, every narrative voice is a construction. Language, itself a construct, the code by which we mediate something, cannot reproduce that which we wish to express, it can only signify it (Derrida [1967] 2016; Denizen 1989). My intention to give as full a portrait as possible, to get as close to the ‘truth’ as possible, forced me to invent a narrative voice. The ‘voice’ melded adult linguistic ability with a child’s sense of wonder and innocence. The world outside his incubator was “The Big Air,” the ventilator “goes *clunk thud whoosh!* and bursts fat needles of air into my chest” (Kay 2013: p. 9). Later, when he needs to grapple with thoughts, Saul uses child-like metaphor which extends beyond his immediate situation: “Spring is a good time for things to begin. It’s when flowers push themselves into the world. Those little white ones, they’re the tiniest, but they are also the bravest, because they come the earliest when winter’s not even over” (p. 177). It is a fictional prism through which we might view another sort of ‘truth’.

The juxtaposition of verifiable data with Saul’s imaginative flights of fancy was a construct which although fictional in execution, rendered the work more effective in emotional/sensate/philosophical terms. I allowed Saul to remember his life in utero, “my Perfect Red Sea,” to take the reader back to less painful times, “Home was where the cat purred, the phone rang, the bath taps gurgled” (p. 160). This provided a different intensity of feeling, a less painful experience; it allowed for a “fuller” relationship with the world and his family.

I presented further flights of fancy, using an invented literary device whereby he accessed, whilst in utero, his mother’s memories,

“I’ve been wandering through great-grand memories, and further back than that” (p. 86). This device delivered parallel stories from his inherited past. The harrowing intensity of the painful encounters of Neonatal Intensive Care necessitated a literary mechanism of escape for both reader and narrator. “Oh if I could just tiptoe away, just for a moment, just ramble back to my Important Place [...]. There is such a place. Buried somewhere. Under all this, under my rememberings” (p. 113). I deliberately paced the reading experience, giving the reader respite from the distressing hospital world, using a fictional mode, because the factual alone would have delivered a relentless, mono-intensity journey for the reader.

My intention was that *Between Two Eternities* would fill the spaces conventional biography couldn’t reach, drawing upon plural modes and genres, because expression of the content required it. It is biographical, using verifiable fact and authentic primary sources; it is pseudo-autobiographical, written in the first person; it is autobiographical, drawing on details of the author’s life; and yet it is a fiction, with an invented ‘voice’, the stream of consciousness of a neonate, rendered into adult language.

A writer’s objective is to make the best expression of her material as possible, and perhaps telling the stories of the most difficult ‘truths’ of ‘real’ life requires not only a blurring of genre boundaries, but a complete blending of tropes, literary modes and generic devices. Our contemporary culture encourages and celebrates this. Thus, we can tell important stories which would otherwise go untold.

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