BOŻENA KUCAŁA[1]
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9882-9305

DOI: 10.15290/CR.2019.25.2.04

Aporia, vortex and the hermeneutic circle in A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*

Abstract. Reflecting A.S. Byatt's mistrust of the prevalence of literary theory, expressed in her own critical writings as well as in her earlier, most successful novel *Possession* (1990), *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) recounts a literary scholar's attempt to reach out towards a world of things, as opposed to arid theoretical concepts. However, his biographical project, undertaken as an alternative to poststructuralist studies, ends in an impasse. This article argues that, compared with the developments in *Possession,* the protagonist's "liberation" from academia is far more ambiguous; his failed attempt to write a biography illustrates rather than satirises some of the dilemmas posed by literary theory. Phineas Nanson remains trapped in poststructuralist concepts which wreck his project, such as the elusiveness of the self, textual indeterminacy, and the demise of the author.

Keywords: A.S. Byatt, academic fiction, campus novel, literary theory, metafiction, biography.

A.S. Byatt is the author of eleven novels, five collections of short stories as well as a comparable number of scholarly publications. A graduate of the universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, she lectured at the University of London before leaving her position to focus on her own writing (Rennison 2005: 38). The duality of Byatt's career is reflected in her fiction, which is strongly grounded in cultural and literary tradition and which she herself describes as "self-conscious realism" (Byatt 2001b: 4). This writerly self-consciousness incorporates elements of academic fiction since Byatt regards her academic background as inseparable from her career as a novelist: "It is customary for writer-academics to claim a kind of schizoid personality, and state that their research, or philosophical thinking, has nothing to do with their work as makers of fiction. […] I have myself always felt that reading and writing and teaching were all part of some whole that it was dangerous to disintegrate" (2001b: 92).

In his overview of Byatt's career, Richard Todd comments that "Byatt's own creative work reflects on the extent to which the writer is justified in drawing on the experiences of her own life" (1997: 5). Two of her novels, *Possession* (1990) and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), stand out as self-reflexive illustrations of Byatt's fusion of creative and academic writing. In each novel the plot

1 Address for correspondence: Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University, al. Adama Mickiewicza 9, 31-120 Kraków, Poland. E-mail: bozena.kucala@uj.edu.pl.

revolves around academics pursuing their research in an uneasy relation to their private lives; in each a similar tendency may be observed, namely to reach out from the textual to the real, to supplant or enrich a scholar's arid existence with engagement with life outside academia. In the much more famous *Possession* the fairy-tale ending quite unequivocally heralds a happy equilibrium between personal and professional life and at the same time a liberation from the constraints and limitations of literary theory. The conclusion of *The Biographer's Tale* echoes *Possession* to a certain extent – like Roland Mitchell in the earlier novel, the protagonist of *The Biographer's Tale* eventually acquires a private life, finds love, starts travelling and learns to take pleasure in the natural world (even becoming an amateur entomologist). Claiming that both novels are academic satires which mock "the second-hand quality of scholarly research", Jane Campbell identifies as a crucial difference between them the fact that while in *Possession* academic discourse gives way to poetry, in *The Biographer's Tale* "the primary place […] is now given to the physical world, which will always be beyond language" (Campbell 2012: 216); the unfolding events bring the protagonist "out of his paper world and closer to the world of growth and change" (221). Katsura Sako also reads *The Biographer's Tale* as a story of social integration and the overcoming of scholarly solipsism; as she puts it, it is "a tale of a self-conscious biographer who finds his place among others" (2010: 280); at the end of the story, he "leave[s] the world of dead abstraction and text to explore the realm of sensual, emotional and affective experience" (286).

This article offers a less optimistic interpretation of the novel and argues that *The Biographer's Tale* is in fact a novel about failure and impasse rather than liberation. Indeed, the novel itself may be said to be a failure in that it never gets off to a proper start, let alone develops an engaging plot or presents a well-rounded, plausible character. The material is a work in progress, waiting to be converted into a tale but never cohering into it. One reviewer remarked that "Byatt has chosen to write a novel that reads like a research notebook" (Scurr 2000: 38) while another described it as "erudite and dense without being the least bit engaging" (Kakutani 2001). By tracing its protagonist-narrator's struggles with writing, *The Biographer's Tale*, "relentlessly self-reflexive" and "the most papery of Byatt's novels" (Campbell 2012: 219), aligns itself with the metafictional strand common to a large proportion of academic fiction (cf. Selejan 2014: 101-102; Gruszewska-Blaim 2014: 46). The book recounts the genesis of a biography which ultimately never gets written. In keeping with the protagonist's poststructuralist training, it could be said that the title itself should be placed under erasure: this is not quite a tale, nor does the narrator eventually become a biographer. But again, if the novel is a failure, it is a deliberate failure which, paradoxically, *succeeds* in achieving a match between its form and its content.

In her study of neo-Victorian narratives, *Victoriana – Histories, Fictions, Criticisms*, Cora Kaplan cites Byatt's novel as a fictionalised reflection on the impossibility of a liberal-humanist biography at the turn of the twenty-first century (2007: 44-45). However, the novel ought to be read in a broader context, as an exemplification of the impasse in literary studies caused by the predominance of literary theory. Whereas *Possession* mockingly exposes the pitfalls of methodologies and theoretical approaches, it can be argued that *The Biographer's Tale* adopts an equivocal

stance. Through the protagonist's failed pursuit, it demonstrates the constraints of literary theory without, however, dismissing the problems which poststructuralism, in particular, addresses. Taking a satirical and parodic stance towards current theoretical approaches (psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism), *Possession* is undoubtedly an instance of what Mona Kratzert and Deborah Richey call "anti-theory fiction" within the genre of the academic novel. According to Kratzert and Richey, towards the end of the twentieth century novelists responded to the "bewildering array of new methodologies and critical approaches" by criticising, satirising or parodying their excesses (1998: 93). However, *The Biographer's Tale*, despite depicting an extreme case of scholarly helplessness, illustrates rather than satirises some of the dilemmas that theoretical studies explore.[2]

In her own scholarly work, Byatt occasionally resorts to theory without committing herself to any particular approach; in the introduction to her collections of essays *Passions of the Mind* (1991), she explains: "… I have used recent literary theory where that seemed useful, though my temperament is agnostic, and I am a non-believer and a non-belonger to schools of thought" (2). If Byatt's novels tend to be informed by her scholarly preoccupations, *The Biographer's Tale* may be traced back to her ambivalent attitude to poststructuralism. In *Passions of the Mind*, she writes: "I am afraid of, and fascinated by, theories of language as a self-referring system of signs, which doesn't touch the world. I am afraid of, and resistant to, artistic stances which say we explore only our own subjectivity" (11).

The novel begins with an act of rebellion against poststructuralist literary criticism. The narrator-protagonist Phineas G. Nanson suddenly decides to abandon his postgraduate seminar. The opening comes *in medias res* in a double sense: the narrative lacks exposition, and the narrator is in the middle of his theoretical class. Phineas briefly indicates the causes of his growing discontent with the theory, whose chief fault appears to be a repetitive, uniformly deconstructive approach to texts and a fixation with textual indeterminacy. In the seminars that he has participated in all texts have been subject to the same procedure: "We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and deceptions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying" (Byatt 2001a: 1). Phineas also deplores the frequent but not necessarily competent references to fashionable theoreticians, the application of abstruse concepts in literary analysis and the unquestioning acceptance of scepticism, inaccuracy and uncertainty as an integral part of scholarly endeavour. The narrator recognises that poststructuralist criticism runs counter to the traditional aim of scholarship, which should be illumination rather than obfuscation (4).[3] He identifies the precise

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2 According to Bruce Robbins, there is a consensus about the periodisation of the academic novel. In the first half of the twentieth century the genre was dominated by the pastoral mode (exemplified by Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* [1945]); the postwar decades were dominated by satire (e.g. Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* [1954], David Lodge's *Changing Places* [1975] and *Small World* [1984], Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* [1975]) (Robbins 2006: 251). *Possession* may be cited as another illustration of the satirical mode; the opening of *The Biographer's Tale* belongs in the same category.

3 Terry Eagleton is a well-known detractor of poststructuralism and deconstruction; his views overlap with those of Byatt's fictional scholar. Eagleton disapproves of structuralism's overwhelming scepticism, which results in compro-

moment when his dissatisfaction reached a critical point: the necessity to abandon his studies dawned on him as the group were discussing "Lacan's theory of *morcellement*, the dismemberment of the imagined body" (1). Phineas comes to realise that the practice of relentless dissection of imagined bodies and literary texts entraps aspiring scholars like him in a narrow, solipsistic and self-referential world. In keeping with a frequent motif in the academic novel,[4] his world is depicted as distinctly *small* (cf. Gruszewska-Blaim 2014: 37-38). The dirty window of the seminar room, which he instinctively interprets as a metaphor for his inability to see the real world outside, reinforces his determination to seek things and facts (4).

However, the protagonist's forceful rejection of his postmodern critical persona is not matched by an equally resolute decision concerning what to do instead. The desire to seek reality, although obviously formulated in opposition to Phineas's previous pursuits, is too vague to be a viable alternative. Thus, *The Biographer's Tale*, which in a sense is the would-be biographer's autobiography, immediately comes up against an impasse, or an *aporia* – to use a key deconstructive term[5] – the first of many such moments in the novel.

Professor Ormerod Goode, whose advice he seeks, suggests the idea of writing a biography of Scholes Destry-Scholes, the author of a biography of a Victorian scholar and polymath, Sir Elmer Bole. The prospect of writing a biography appeals to Phineas precisely because it flies in the face of the major tenets of poststructuralist criticism. A biography impresses him as "a model of factual solidity, just what is needed as a corrective of the poststructuralist seminar he has left" (Campbell 2012: 216). As Goode says, "The art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts" (5). Writing a biography implies that reality is knowable and may be expressed in a verbal account, that words correspond to things, that it is possible to reconstruct someone's life from the existing material, mainly textual, evidence.[6]

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mising concepts such as "truth", "certainty", and "the real" (Eagleton 1989: 144) and, as a consequence, undermines any debates about social or political issues (146).

4 In his essay "The Rise of the Academic Novel" Jeffrey J. Williams distinguishes between the academic novel and the campus novel – terms which are often used interchangeably. He defines the former as a novel featuring academic professionals and portraying "adult predicaments in marriage and home as well as the workplace". The latter takes place on campus, centres on students and frequently takes the shape of a coming-of-age narrative (2012: 561-562). This division, however, cannot be maintained in relation to a large proportion of academic fiction, and is certainly inadequate with regard to *The Biographer's Tale*, which shows almost nothing of campus life and features a solitary, estranged postgraduate student confronting scholarly problems. That is why in the present article the term "academic novel" is used as the most general term for fiction concerned with scholarly life.

5 In the words of Eagleton, "The tactic of deconstructive criticism […] is to show how texts come to embarrass their own ruling systems of logic; and deconstruction shows this by fastening on the 'symptomatic' points, the *aporia* or impasses of meaning, where texts get into trouble, come unstuck, offer to contradict themselves" (1989: 133-134).

6 *Routledge Encyclopedia of Literary Theory* defines biography as "a genre of historiography concerned with representing the lives of individual people" and claims that "[s]ince the eighteenth-century, all definitions of biography have come to depend on a set of three core criteria. A biography (1) consists of a written text; (2) represents the life of a real person; and (3) does so in the mode of factual speech, that is, it is to be understood as true" (2008: 42).

Poststructuralism, by contrast, intentionally subverts empiricism (Berman 1988: 199-200), "subverts the presumption of a coherent, non-contradictory, comprehensible (clearly interpretable) meaning [of a text]" and insists on the inherent indeterminacy of language as "an unfounded chain of signifiers" (Berman 1988: 211). Poststructuralism is also informed by a "strongly anti-humanist perspective" (Bertens 2001: 120); in the words of Nicolas Tredell, "Post-structuralism and deconstruction have focused particularly on attacking the concept of the individual human subject" (1987: 99). The low status of biography at the time of the emergence of poststructuralism reflected the current critique of the idea of the self as "a singular or coherent entity"; hence, within the changed cultural framework biographical writing was largely ignored rather than openly attacked (Caine 2010: 22).

For pre-postmodern scholars, the art of biography presupposed the existence of a unique individual; as Professor Goode puts it in his conversation with Phineas, "From egg to eventual decay, each of us is unique. What can be nobler […] or more exacting, than to explore, to constitute, to open, a whole man, a whole opus, to us?" (5).[7] It is worth noting that Goode's advice is based on the outmoded assumption that the truth about an individual's life is to be discovered rather than constructed (let alone *de*constructed).[8] But, ironically, the protagonist's own condition seems to contradict the humanist notion of the self. His as yet unformed academic persona corresponds to the amorphousness of his self. At the beginning his personal life appears non-existent. He reveals very little about his past besides saying that his father "disappeared" (3) and his mother died recently, an event which he associates with missing his seminar due to her burial (1). Hence, Phineas embarks on his new life by deciding to engage with another man's life, which, however, is not likely to liberate him from a dependence on other people's concepts. What makes his project even more ironic, at the same time undermining it at its inception, is the fact that he is fascinated not so much by the biographer whose life he is supposed to research but the man Destry-Scholes wrote about. In his attempt to reach out to the empirical world Phineas is erroneously inclined to treat a textual reconstruction of a life as a point of access to reality:

> It is difficult to recall the state of febrile excitement I was in over my own release from a life of theoretical pedagogy. […] Perhaps because my own life was a fluid vacuum, I became obsessed with the glittery fullness of the life of Elmer Bole. Compared to the busy systems, the cross-referred abstractions, of the life I had renounced, the three volumes loomed in my mind as an almost impossible achievement of contact with a concrete world (always eschew the word 'real' is an imperative I *have* carried over from my past) of arrangement of things and events for delight and instruction. (18-19)

7 Cf. Hermione Lee: "Biographies of human beings are generally about real people, not fictional or mythological characters. Therefore the biographer has a responsibility to the truth, and should tell us what actually happened in the life" (2009: 6).

8 In his article on contemporary biographical approaches, John Given observes that nowadays accounts of "fragmented", "alienated" or "saturated" selves are typical in reflections on the postmodern condition (2015: 56).

Enthusiastic about his project, Phineas fails to notice that the vicariousness of the subject of his research may entrap him in an interminable poststructuralist chain of deferred meaning – which it soon does: "It occurred to me that it was a delicious, delicate tact, being, so to speak, the third in line, organising my own attention to the attention of a man intent on discovering the whole truth about yet a third man" (24). Even though he is well versed in poststructuralist theory, it seems to escape his notice that his biographical plans blatantly contravene, for example, the implications of Paul de Man's concept of the textuality of the self. In his classic deconstructive work, *Allegories of Reading*, de Man stresses that the self, which in his view is constituted by discourse, is, like any deconstructed text, implicated in a process of "endless regression": "The discourse by which the figural structure of the self is asserted fails to escape from the categories it claims to deconstruct, and this remains true, of course, of any discourse which pretends to reinscribe in its turn the figure of this aporia. There can be no escape from the dialectical movement which produces the text" (1979: 186-87).

Phineas is deeply impressed by the eventfulness of the Victorian man's life and the diversity of his interests as reflected in the biography, which leads him to conclude that researching this life must have enabled Destry-Scholes to share, at a remove, the richness of Bole's experience. By repeating the strategy the narrator hopes to achieve the same effect. This calculation, however, misfires since Bole's biographer turns out to be a strangely elusive, even insignificant man. Phineas's quest for information about Destry-Scholes yields almost no result. The journey to the town of his birth leads to a dead end, when the protagonist not only finds out nothing at all but begins to "feel trapped by this ordinary place" (32), which reminds him of the uninspiring neighbourhood of his own childhood. Although identification with the subject of one's research is a taboo in academic work, Phineas cannot help feeling an affinity with Destry-Scholes. The sense of resemblance grows when the obscurity of the man turns out to be comparable to the paucity of his biographer's personal life. The protagonist's continuing immersion in poststructuralist habits of thought may be observed also in his pedantic linguistic convolutions: "It has been dinned into me that objectivity is an exploded and deconstructed notion. But subjectivity – the meeting of two hypothetical subjects, in this case Scholes Destry-Scholes and myself – is just as suspect, since it can't be looked at objectively" (98).

As his search continues, Phineas discovers only oblique traces of the man. Professor Goode has some vague recollections of him from the time when he came to give a lecture about thirty years before; Destry-Scholes's niece, his only living relative, never met her uncle and can supply no information; Destry-Scholes's disjointed archive of notes and photographs contains no photograph of the man himself and almost no personal statements, in contrast to a multitude of quotations from other sources. It appears that Destry-Scholes amassed an array of material about other

people while effacing himself.[9] Perplexed by the archive,[10] Phineas reflects on the failure of his quest, suspecting that Destry-Scholes, in contradiction to the principles underlying the art of biography, may have anticipated the postmodern scepticism about the existence of a unified self:

> … it could be argued that Destry-Scholes himself, in evading the identification of his 'characters' for so long, was intending to show that identity, that the self, is a dubious matter, not of the first consequence. (97)[11]

In the seminal poststructuralist essay "The Death of the Author" (1967) Roland Barthes challenged the status of the author, arguing against the practice of taking account of the author's biography and authorial intention in critical analysis. Barthes rejects the view that the author is the origin of the text, the source of its meaning and its interpretation. In a well-known formulation, Barthes insists that a text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (2001: 1468); he further compares a text to a fabric: "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1468), […] the structure can be followed, 'run', like the thread of a stocking, at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath" (1469). Thus, Barthes refutes the idea of originality in literature, at the same time reducing the author to the function of a scriptor.[12] Implicit in his argument is the notion that the self is a linguistic construct. Barthes describes writing as "that neutral, composite, oblique

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9 Jacques Derrida explores the notion of the archive in relation to Freud's work, suggesting that the desire for the archive is motivated by contradictory drives – the wish to preserve the past is accompanied by the desire to eradicate it. As Derrida puts it, "there is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, this aggression and destruction drive" (2005: 19). It is likely that the archive which Phineas studies is a result of such conflicting desires: on the one hand, to accumulate traces of several biographies, and, on the other hand, to prevent the potential researcher from gaining any substantial access to the men's lives.

10 Apparently, Phineas is guided by the traditional concept of the archive as a collection of primary records, endowed with authority by virtue of their authenticity, which promise to offer the starting point for research. As Derrida explains in *Archive Fever*, the Greek etymology of the word "archive" evokes at once the ideas of commencement and commandment: "the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence*", and "the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, there where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given" (2005: 1).

11 Destry-Scholes's career as a biographer appears to illustrate changes in the approaches to the genre of biography, as outlined by Hermione Lee: "The belief in a definable, consistent self, an identity that develops through the course of a life-story and that can be conclusively described, breaks down, to a great extent, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at a time when psychoanalysis, scientific discoveries such as the theory of relativity, and experiments in art forms, are producing a more indeterminate approach to identity. Western biography from this time has more to say about contradictions and fluctuations in identity, and about the unknowability of the self. But such contrasting ways of describing the self overlap and conflict, rather than following each other in a neatly chronological order" (2009: 16).

12 In a similar vein, Derrida contends in *Of Grammatology* that "the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system" (1984: 160).

space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (1466).

Barthes's radical statement of the author's dissolution among a tissue of citations – which, as Tredell observes, "can be situated within a much broader challenge to the idea of the 'individual'" (1987: 99) – may serve as an adequate description of Byatt's character's failed search for the author. Having almost no other evidence, he sets out to study Destry-Scholes's writings with the express aim of revealing the author's identity, intention and life story behind the texts. Yet he finds himself confronting precisely the problems he thought he had evaded by abandoning his seminar. The two collections of Destry-Scholes's papers he receives do not even need dismantling since they are already fragmented, discontinuous, incoherent and unreliable. What the protagonist tries to do is reverse the practice of textual deconstruction by building a biographical narrative out of the multifarious, incompatible pieces. Yet the texts successfully resist his efforts. The textual fabric cannot be contained and controlled: "the threads ran out all the time, from Linnaeus to Artedi, from Galton to Darwin and Pearson" (167); "… no string has an end" (168).

The first set of documents, which he receives from an archivist at the University of Lincoln, is an immediate disappointment. The papers are flawed – worn out, poorly typed, with some words and sentences missing. The first stage of Phineas's work consists in selection and ordering: he identifies the pieces to be fragments of three biographical accounts of personages who are later revealed to be Carl Linnaeus, Francis Galton and Henrik Ibsen. However, even when divided into the three categories, the texts puzzle the scholar with their fragmentariness and generic diversity, and, often, uncertain authorship: they range from extracts from the three men's notebooks and their scientific (Linnaeus and Galton) or literary works (Ibsen), to autobiographies as well as Destry-Scholes's own summaries and comments. To his further confusion, the would-be biographer suspects that some of the materials were fabricated by Destry-Scholes, which in hindsight calls into question the reliability of his biography of Elmer Bole. The metaphor of the mosaic which Phineas employs to describe the status of the material he is exploring is a counterpart of Barthes's "tissue of quotations". As Campbell points out (2012: 220), following his reading of Destry-Scholes's biography of Bole, whose diverse interests included mosaic-making, Phineas detects an analogy between this process and how Destry-Scholes lifted and reworked material for his own purposes so that the boundaries between originality, plagiarism and invention blur.

Nonetheless, the papers throw no light on Destry-Scholes himself. The fact that all the papers, under the heading "Three documents" are quoted *in extenso* by the narrator (they occupy fifty-nine pages in the novel) must be taken as an expression of his inability to cope with the material at hand, and possibly his wish for his prospective reader (whose existence he often evokes and at the same denies) to share his confusion and helplessness. Phineas never moves beyond that stage; the material confronts him with a major deadlock, provoking a futile quest to follow up some of the leads in the three quasi-biographies left by Destry-Scholes. He seeks to impose order, coherence and unity. However, his interpretative effort initiates the well-known problem of the hermeneutic circle: texts refer him back and forth to other texts, throwing some light on what he has

already read but revealing further gaps and puzzles. Phineas decides to opt out of this self-referential (vicious) circle: he could pursue the clues further, but, he asks himself, "where would it stop? Linnaeus would lead to Swedenborg, Galton to Darwin, Ibsen to Strindberg or Shaw, and I would run like a ferret from library to library, shelf to shelf" (102). Ultimately, he is unable to determine the significance of the disjointed archive. The texts might have been collected with a view to another project, or three separate projects, or perhaps none. The parallels between the three incomplete biographies may be meaningful, but it is just as likely that they are accidental. What is most frustrating is that Destry-Scholes appears to lurk there, behind the texts, but remains invisible and unreachable.

The author's tantalising absence from the texts is compounded by the mysterious circumstances of his death. Destry-Scholes had travelled to the Maelstrøm in the North Sea and disappeared, presumably having drowned. However, his body was never recovered; an empty boat was found near the famous vortex. As a result, his would-be biographer lacks a piece of information which would be required "to make up a complete and gratifying, in a realist sense, narrative of Destry-Scholes's life" (Sako 2010: 283).[13]

In his desperate search for connections and explanations, Phineas speculates that the biographer went there in the footsteps of Linnaeus, who described his own journey to the Maelstrøm in his autobiographical writings. However, biographical guesses are compounded by the discovery that Linnaeus fabricated the account, never having been to the location. Several biographical clues offer themselves, none of which can be verified. Destry-Scholes might have gone to the north to pursue his research on the Swedish scientist, or simply out of personal interest. But the narrator's experience substantiates yet another line of speculation. After his extensive (though ultimately futile) research on Linnaeus, the image of the dangerous vortex holds a special fascination for him. His academic failure and his attraction to the Maelstrøm appear to be somehow connected. He asks for a job at a travel agency after seeing a paper model of the Maelstrøm in its window, and explains to the managers "That I was thinking of writing a book that had run into the ground for lack of information. That I wanted eventually to see the Maelstrøm, though I was not quite sure why. My 'subject', I said, had possibly, not certainly, drowned in it" (107). If there exists some convergence between the experience of Destry-Scholes and his would-be biographer, then it is plausible that Destry-Scholes's journey was also a response to his inability to make his materials cohere into a biography (or biographies). The drowning could then be regarded as an ill-fated attempt at escape from the scholarly deadlock, or as a metaphor for his hopeless engulfment by texts.

The narrator, however, resumes his efforts when he is contacted by Destry-Scholes's niece who offers him access to another set of her uncle's materials. Phineas repeats the same strategies: arranging and rearranging the card index, dividing and categorising the documents, which concern mainly the same three aforementioned personages: Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen. Phineas,

13 Cf. Hermione Lee: "There is a lingering idea of biography as the complete, true story of a human being, the last word on a life" (2009: 18).

by turns, studies those three lives, discovering more and more leads that could be pursued further and further, as his research begins to branch out. He learns a number of facts, is able to improve on Destry-Scholes's findings, and yet again is compelled to conclude that his newly acquired knowledge is useless since the texts, in their entirety, remain undecidable. Consequently, the second stage of his research is "second" only chronologically; rather than advancing his work, it only re-enacts the first failure.

One element in this archive seems increasingly significant to the protagonist and has a bearing on his biographical project. The accompanying collection of photographs contains Galton's "composites". The Victorian scientist developed a technique of fusing images of several persons into one, with a view to creating a new, single image, which would combine the features of all the individuals. These experiments were motivated by his growing scepticism about the idea of the unique self. Some of the index cards cite his views:

> We as yet understand nothing of the way in which our conscious selves are related to the separate lives of the billions of cells of which the body of each of us is composed. […] Our part in the universe may possibly in some distant way be analogues to that of the cells in an organised body, and our personalities may be the transient but essential elements of an immortal and cosmic mind. (225)

Galton liked to create composites of people who were related in order to capture their common features. One of the photographs is a composite picture of Linnaeus's family, which, Phineas speculates, might actually have been produced by Destry-Scholes (184).

Unable to make sense of the archive, the researcher concludes that it could be Destry-Scholes's counterpart of Galton's composite pictures. Destry-Scholes had made a thorough study of three eminent individuals, yet "appeared […] to have been more interested in what they had in common than in what made them unique" (239). Thus, the array of texts Phineas deals with turns out to be a Barthesian "tissue of quotations", "that composite, oblique space […] where all identity is lost" (Barthes 2001: 1466), and this also pertains to the identity of the author of the archive. Naturally, the erasure of a person's individuality pre-empts the aims of biographical writing. This might be the reason why Destry-Scholes's outstanding biography of Elmer Bole was not followed by another publication in the same genre.

Once again, and this time finally, the protagonist admits defeat. Not only his research but also his life has reached a dead end: "I had no idea what to do with myself. None at all" (245). The brief story of his attempt to abandon poststructuralism, instead of progressing, comes full circle. He again consults Professor Goode, who accepts his admission of defeat without offering him any further suggestions, besides casting doubt on the narrator's suitability for academic work. The fact that approximately half the space in the book is taken up by Destry-Scholes's documents causes also the narrator's own identity to be elided by other personas, which replicates the phenomenon of the author's near-absence – in this case from Phineas's own autobiographical "tale". His project

degenerates into postmodern clichés about "the slippery nature of human identity" and "the inevitable difficulty of recovering historical truth" (cf. Alfer & Edwards de Campos 2010: 130).

The protagonist's decision to discontinue his research is again intertwined with the significance of the Maelstrøm. He is presented with a newspaper report concerning Destry-Scholes's disappearance, accompanied by a photograph of an empty boat – a final illustration of how completely the man disappeared from any records. Confronted with the image of the whirlpool which in all probability engulfed his biographee, Phineas metaphorically hovers near the edge of the vortex of the scholarly endeavour that has nearly erased his own life and identity. Meanwhile, he has discovered the dizzying depths into which further research on the subject would have plunged him: "Destry-Scholes's fabrication of Linnaeus's fabrication of his visit to the Maelstrøm was a pastiche of Edgar Allan Poe"[14] [256]). The room of the Scandinavian scholar he consults, who obsessively researches that dangerous place in the North Sea – and who supplies the relevant copy of the newspaper – serves as a conclusive warning of some of the perils of academic life: "… there he was, in a dusty attic, behind a dusty table loaded with precarious heaps of leather volumes and yellowing papers, and crumbs. […] Jespersen sat in the gloom, in a nest of ivory hair, his long white beard wound into his papers, his long white hair merging into it, his papery-white, wrinkled face and his pale, cracked lips" (247). Jerpersen, a cloistered scholar, represents a traditional, meticulous mode of scholarship, which has brought upon him a condition of life-in-death.[15] Yet the dirty window in his room reminds the protagonist of the poststructuralist seminar room which he abandoned at the beginning of his story. Hence, the conclusion of the tale may be described by means of the metaphors of a blocked path, a vicious circle and a vortex.

The end is distinctly anti-climactic, as the character flatly gives up his plans: "I could, in theory, have gone and searched [the newspaper's] archive. But I didn't think I would. I stared at the empty boat, and the dark newsprinted water, and thanked Jespersen, and thanked Ormerod Goode, and went home" (249).

In the last few pages of the novel the protagonist briefly recounts his subsequent travels, his love affairs, his growing appreciation of the natural world. This may be regarded as a fulfilment of his desire to become involved with "things" rather than dealing with mere words. The fact that the protagonist acquires a life outside the confines of academia and develops some sense of selfhood relates this novel to *Possession*. But there are major differences as well. *Possession* is about characters "for whom literature and intellectual pursuits are central to the shape and meaning of their lives" (Rennison 2005: 41). In the earlier novel the scholars' private and professional lives successfully intersect: the literary critics Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey fall in love, Roland discovers a gift for poetry, they jointly complete their biographical search and achieve academic

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14 The reference is to Edgar Alan Poe's story "A Descent into the Maelstrom".

15 A parallel may be found in the image of "the Ash Factory" – basement rooms in the British Museum, occupied by scholars working on the poet Randolph Ash in *Possession*.

success; at the end, prospects for new research are opening up.[16] In *The Biographer's Tale*, the next stage in the narrator's life is the aftermath of his academic failure. Even structurally the novel tips the balance in favour of the exhaustive account of Phineas's defeat. As Michiko Kakutani observes, the last chapters "come too late to make the reader the least bit interested in Phineas's sentimental education. They remain overshadowed by the ponderous chapters that have gone before, and they feel like an incongruous coda to what is an otherwise lugubrious and flat-footed novel" (Kakutani 2001). Having rejected poststructuralist criticism, the protagonist was unable to find a viable alternative and became entangled in precisely the problems which poststructuralism foregrounds in literary studies: the instability of language, the dissolution of the unified self, the slipperiness and infinite connectivity of texts, the provisionality of knowledge, the questionability of the autonomy of the author. The protagonist's academic experience confirms Derrida's radical proposition in *Of Grammatology* that "*There is nothing outside of the text*" (1984: 158)[17] since his incapacity to track down his biographee proves that he cannot transcend the text and reach reality.

Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb, a well-known American conservative intellectual, an admirer of Victorian values and a defender of traditional historiography, takes a decisively negative stance towards the effect of postmodernism on academia. She objects to the widespread arbitrariness of interpretation, the assumption of the linguistic constitution of reality, "a denial of the fixity of any 'text'", and the consequent undermining of any truth about reality (1997: 158).18 As she has ironically put it, the ultimate ambition of postmodernism is "to liberate us all from the coercive ideas of reality and truth" (1997: 161). Postmodernist history does it by celebrating aporia: "difference, discontinuity, disparity, contradiction, discord, indeterminacy, ambiguity, irony, paradox, perversity, opacity, obscurity, anarchy, chaos" (Himmelfarb 1997: 170). Postmodernism, for Himmelfarb, is a dead end; for all its apparent attractiveness, it might be "an invitation to intellectual and moral suicide" (1997: 173). In her view, both in postmodernist history and in postmodernist literary criticism "theory has become a calling in itself", which results in the abandonment of hands-on research (1997: 162). However, she speculates that, like other intellectual fashions, postmodernism, in its diverse versions, will before long be supplanted by new ideas. Writing in the late 1990s (i.e. just before the publication of Byatt's novel), she judges deconstruction to be already *passé*, as well as detects the first signs of disaffection with postmodernism (1997: 171).

16 Sally Dalton-Brown observes that one of the conventions on which the academic novel is based is the academic's dilemma "whether to opt for the life of the mind or the life of desires, whether sexual, status-oriented, or commercial lust" (2008: 592). The protagonists of *Possession* are spared the choice and eventually are set to enjoy the best of both worlds. Phineas Nanson in *The Biographer's Tale* drifts towards the latter option but it is a matter of necessity rather than choice.

17 Derrida states that reading "cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general" (1984: 158).

18 Her article appeared first in *Times Literary Supplement* on 16 October 1992.

In his essay, "Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties" (1999), Hayden White, whom Himmelfarb invokes as one of her chief antagonists, to a degree accepts her description of the implications of postmodernist thinking for contemporary historiography, but disputes Himmelfarb's unreservedly negative evaluation of the new tendencies. Insofar as in studying the past postmodern scholars indeed do foreground its textuality while at the same time rejecting any "fixity" of texts, their methodology helps to expose the idea of an established, objective truth about the past as an ideologically-tainted delusion (1999: 35-37). White echoes the tenets of deconstruction when he admits that for postmodernists a text "is always at odds with itself", it "knows neither its archetype nor its genealogy", and "may be said to write its reader quite as much as its writer can be said only to read it" (1999: 36-37). This observation, however, leads White to conclusions which are fundamentally at variance with Himmelfarb's: postmodernism's denial of objectivism does not amount to a commitment to "lie, delusion, fantasy, or fiction"; rather, it is "is more interested in reality than it is in truth as an end in itself" (1999: 38). Postmodernism, according to White, is underlain by the recognition that "reality" is always partly constructed through discourse.

It would appear that the protagonist of Byatt's novel is caught between these two positions. He discovers in himself a yearning for a traditional methodology, which promises to yield the ideal of truth and objectivity, but in the course of his work he finds out that at least some of the problems raised by contemporary theory are not unfounded. Unable to find a way out of his dilemmas, he fails to create an academic identity for himself. That is why, unlike the protagonists of *Possession* – and unlike the author of both novels – Phineas has to separate the two dimensions of his life and abandons literary studies altogether. The fact that he eventually finds fulfilment and endows his life with meaning outside academia poses disturbing questions about the value and relevance of contemporary literary scholarship.

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Bożena Kucała is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, where she teaches nineteenth-century and contemporary English literature. Her research interests include contemporary English fiction, especially the historical novel and neo-Victorian fiction. Main publications: *Intertextual Dialogue with the Victorian Past in the Contemporary Novel* (2012), co-edited books: *Writer and Time: James Joyce and After* (2010), *Confronting the Burden of History: Literary Representations of the Past* (2012), *Travelling Texts: J.M. Coetzee and Other Writers* (2014), *The Art of Literature, Art in Literature* (2014), *Powieść brytyjska w XXI wieku* (2018). She has also published numerous articles on contemporary British and Irish writers (Graham Swift, A.S. Byatt, David Mitchell, John Banville).