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A new reality: Writing across gaps and thresholds in biography

Abstract:

In 1999, American biographer Edmund Morris famously and controversially inserted a fictionalised version of himself into what was expected to be a thoroughly conventional biography of Ronald Reagan. Arguing that the true Reagan could not be depicted through the techniques of orthodox biography, Morris suggested that by virtue of his research he ‘had, in a sense, been there’ throughout Reagan’s life; that he had become in effect Reagan’s ‘*döppelgänger*’. As such, Morris argued, he was well positioned to write a ‘memoir’ of Reagan that drew on this knowledge, fictionalised though the mode of narration was: hence the resultant text, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*.

Morris’s work in *Dutch* is perhaps the most extreme and radical example of the many ways that biographers may approach the gaps and thresholds of writing another person’s life. This paper explores the techniques used by biographers to surmount these and consider how the failure of these techniques to illuminate his subject spurred Morris to the radical approach found in *Dutch*.

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In 1985, Ronald Reagan became the first sitting US President to authorise the production of a biography of him. Edmund Morris, an award-winning biographer of Theodore Roosevelt, promised to produce a ‘substantial, scholarly book’ (in Katukani 1999) that would take advantage of the benefits of an authorisation and co-operation—access to his subject, colleagues, friends, family and unpublished documents—that was denied to other biographers and scholars. And yet, over the ensuing years, Morris consistently found that his efforts to produce that text were lifeless:

The words died on the page because Ronald Reagan resisted orthodox narrative and resisted orthodox analysis [...] And like many writers starting on large projects, I had to find the key, the technical key, and had not yet found it. And when I found it, at a place very appropriately called Eureka Collage, I was liberated. (Morris, in Carvajal 1999)

While walking across the fields at Reagan’s old school in 1992, regretting that he ‘could not share the life of his subject, or at least have been able to witness the young ‘Dutch’ Reagan walking those same lawns in the fall of 1928’ (Publishers note, in Morris 1999), Morris felt an acorn crack under his shoe and had an epiphany: a realisation that he ‘had, in a sense, been there’ during Reagan’s time at school. By dint of research and interviews, through reading of diaries and records, in following the threads of his subject’s life since his commission in 1985, Morris suggested that he had lived an echo of his subject’s life. As his publisher, Random House, put it:

[...] All biographers become *döppelgangers* of their subjects, vicariously living the very lives they tell. Why not make himself [Morris] an actual, if imaginary, character in the story—in order to bring an extra sharpness of observation of events unquestionably authentic? Simply put, why not write a ‘memoir’ of Ronald Reagan? (Publisher’s note, in Morris 1999)

Framing the text so—with Morris a lightly fictionalised, longtime observer and school friend of Reagan, who narrates the course of his subject’s life—was Morris’ sought-after ‘key’:

Any orthodox quest for the real ‘Dutch’ [...] is bound to be an exercise in frustration [...] Since Reagan has been primarily a phenomenon of the American imagination—a mythical apotheosis of the best and the worst in us—he can be re-created only by an extension of biographical technique. (Publisher’s note, in Morris 1999)

Perhaps predictably, upon publication, that ‘extension of biographical technique’ was found controversial. Denied the magisterial biography Reagan that had been expected (see Hamilton 2008, p. 52-3), a cavalcade of critics took Morris to task for various sins of narcissism, inaccuracy, betrayal and irrelevance. *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani, for example, wrote that Morris’ book was ‘bizarre, irresponsible and monstrously self-absorbed’ (Katukani 1999). While much of the initial reaction appears to have been uninformed or knee-jerk criticism—a journalist in Amsterdam,

for example, rang Random House to ask what on earth Ronald Reagan had to do with Holland (Morris 2012, p. 443)—the controversy thrust into the limelight one of the central and long-discussed problems of the biographer's endeavor: how they recreate. As scholar James Olney puts it:

If *bios* is 'the course of a life, a lifetime', and if it is already spent and past, then how is it going to be made present again, how is it ever going to be recaptured, how is that which is no longer living going to be restored to life? When 'is' has been transformed into 'was', when the unique moment of the present slips into the huge abyss of the past, if it remains in any sense real at all, then it must be within a new and entirely different order of reality from that informing the present. (Olney 1980, p. 237)

How biographers create that 'new and entirely different order of reality' is worth considering closely. In this paper, I note techniques various biographers have used to create that 'new and entirely different order of reality' in order to depict their subjects, and compare those techniques to how they worked within the context of Morris' *Dutch*. The techniques noted are by no means the most prominent or regular that biographers use. What this paper aims to do is shed light on how biographers attempt to 'produce the living effect, while remaining true to dead fact' (Holmes 1985, p. 27), bridging gaps of time, space and knowledge, and to explain why the failure of these techniques to compel an understanding of his subject spurred Morris to use such a radical approach.

2

A.J.A. Symons' *The Quest For Corvo* (1970 [1934]) has become a classic within the biography field for the way that Symons depicts the problems and excitement of the biographer's craft. *Corvo* is a detective-like work, ostensibly about a minor British writer named Frederick Rolfe, but more—as the title suggests—about how a biographer documents his or her subject's life. In Symons' case, the 'quest' begins with being his being handed a novel authored by Rolfe. The novel is *Hadrian the Seventh*, a far-fetched work that is at once so interesting and adept in craft that Symons decides to follow up on its mysterious author:

As I lay restlessly turning from side to side, I realised suddenly that my curiosity was still unslaked. What was the course and cause of this tragic decline? In *Hadrian* and the letters I had (what I took to be) the opening and the close of a career. What story lay in between? (Symons 1970, p. 28)

What follows is a catalogue of how Symons obtains letters and correspondence to and from Rolfe, and the linkage of this material to explain how Rolfe lived. In lieu of authorial omniscience or narrative coherence, the reader of *Quest For Corvo* is presented with gaps and contradictions, some of which are due to its eccentric and vituperative subject (who pretended to be a priest and a member of the aristocracy), others due to the problem outlined by Olney—of reconstructing and recreating the past.

Symons works within tight bounds. He makes no attempt to present Rolfe as an evolving person, chronicled from womb to tomb: there simply aren't the records to do so. Instead, Rolfe springs forth fully formed and unchanging, a monster that manipulates, pleads, rages and huffs; who writes drawing closely from his own life; who is at once maddening and pitiable. Freudian analysis is not the focus: his subject twenty years dead by the time Symons began writing, *The Quest for Corvo* is concerned with documenting Rolfe's actions and interactions. 'Though the peculiar inner energy which possessed Fr. Rolfe is beyond analysis,' Symons writes, 'the external events of his life, and his reactions to them, can be collated and made comprehensible' (1970, p. 257). The collation of those events occurs mostly in letters exchanged between Symons and those who knew Rolfe, and letters between those people and Rolfe himself. Annotated and framed by Symons' reconstructed chronology, the inclusion of information on how Symons obtained the documents is important for shedding light on biographical technique. Sometimes, it is simply serendipity: 'Mr. Pirie-Gordon was the missing link between Rolfe's middle and his later years. I was able to piece the story together, to watch another rotation of the wheel to which Rolfe was bound' (Symons 1970, p. 185). At other points, prospective sources are unhelpful:

It was not by accident, I was certain, that these letters selected for me by Mr. Herbert Rolfe threw no light on his brother's end in Venice. Evidently the same motives had dictated his choice as those which were behind the refusal of *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*; and, remembering the Millard letters, it was not difficult to guess what they were. (Symons 1970, p. 63)

In depicting this chase for knowledge, Symons presents the technique most commonly associated with biography: the inquiry for information and perspective, in this case with letters, and the use of documents to support a constructed narrative arc inflected by those documents. He is helped by his subject's propensity for colourful language and compulsive letter-writing habits: 'I feel exactly as though I had been beaten with beetroots and mangold wurzels all over, especially on my face, neck and hands,' Rolfe wrote (in Symons 1970, p. 191).

Biographers most commonly work using archives and networks of connection. As the Australian biographer David Day notes, 'biographers mimic the genealogists and go to the basic sources, such as death certificates, birth certificates, marriage certificates, wills, probate, and employment records' (2002, p. 36). American biographer Robert Caro notes that advice to 'turn every goddamn page' has allowed him to find 'crucial things that nobody ever knew about' Lyndon Johnson. 'There's always original stuff if you look hard enough', he argues (in McGrath 2012). But biographers also note the limitations of documentary records. Although documents suggest objectivity and accuracy, they can never be a whole story. 'It is in this sense that all real biographical evidence is 'third party' evidence; evidence that is witnessed,' English biographer Richard Holmes writes (1985, p. 68). Replies not written, inaccuracies recorded, missing letters and memos: all of these can make a reliance on the documentary record problematic. For those biographers writing on contemporary figures—such as Nicholas Stuart, who wrote on Kevin Rudd prior to his becoming prime minister of

Australia in 2007—the available documentary record is likely to be very thin. More material—the revelatory material—would come after the passage of decades, if it ever becomes available. The scarcity of documentary records, then, made documents that were available at once more valuable but also more problematic for the weight that would be attached to them. The use of interview material may compensate for the lack of documents, but is similarly problematic for the reliability of memory, perspective, and completeness.

In *Dutch*, Morris had access to a wide array of documentary material. As mentioned before, Reagan extended to him co-operation never before granted:

I asked for unlimited access to the White House as an independent, nongovernment writer, regular interviews with the President, travel-along privileges (but at my own cost) whenever he took important trips, and for scrutiny of whatever personal papers he felt comfortable sharing with me. Ronald Reagan happened to be about the most comfortably trusting individual any biographer could hope to approach. I was not surprised at his willingness to let me see and write what I liked, including the personal diary he was keeping, in patient longhand, of every day of his presidency. (Morris 2012, p. 448)

And yet, as Morris told a group of historians and scholars in an address later leaked to the press, this access to documents simply didn't provide him with the material he needed:

Ronald Reagan is a man of benign remoteness and no psychological curiosity, either about himself or others. He considers his life to have been unremarkable. He gives nothing of himself to intimates (if one can use such a noun in such a phrase), believing that he has no self to give. In the White House he wrote hundreds of personal letters, and obediently kept an eight-year diary, but the handwritten sentences, while graceful and grammatical (never an erasure, never a flaw of spelling or punctuation!), are about as revelatory of the man behind them as the calligraphy of a copyist. (Publisher's note, in Morris 1999)

3

In her novel *Possession: A Romance* (1991), English writer A.S. Byatt satirises the proclivity of biographers to retrace their subject's journeys and travels:

He, Cropper, on the other hand, had early begun to trace the journeyings of Randolph Ash [...] His first expedition had been to the North Yorkshire Moors and coast where Ash had enjoyed a solitary walking-tour, combined with amateur marine biolgisising, in 1859. Cropper had repeated this tour in 1949 [...] Later he had followed Ash to Amsterdam and the Hague, and had walked in Ash's tracks in Iceland [...] He had undertaken all of Ash's major journeys, visiting Venice, Naples, the Alps, the Black Forest and the Breton coast. One of his last ventures had been the reconstruction of the wedding journey of Randolph and Ellen Ash in the summer of 1848. [...] He had settled in Ash's hotel in Aix and had done the Ashes' excursions, culminating in a visit to the Fontaine de Vaucluse, where the poet Petrarch lived in solitude for sixteen

years [...] The profit of this journey could be seen in Cropper's account of the Fountain in *The Great Ventriloquist*. (Byatt 1991, p. 119-120)

For some biographers this reconstruction of a subject's journey is crucial to their writing of biography. Richard Holmes has made it a trope of his research to do just this. In *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985), Holmes retraces the journey made by Robert Louis Stevenson that was chronicled in Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1964 [1879]). For his biography of Shelley (1974), Holmes hitchhiked through Italy, doggedly following the poet's itinerary to the point of sleeping on the beach off which his subject had drowned. For *Coleridge: Early Visions* (1989), Holmes retraced his subject's travels through Germany, only to be interrupted by the barbed wire of the East German border. Describing these journeys as 'feeling my way into a place' (in Atlas 1994, p. 63), Holmes argues that the biography form itself is a 'kind of haunting':

Nothing of course that would make a Gothic story, or interest the Society for Psychical Research; but an act of deliberate psychological trespass, an invasion or encroachment of the present upon the past, and in some sense the past upon the present. And in this experience of haunting I first encountered—without then realising it—what I now think of as the essential process of biography. (Holmes 1985, p. 66)

This process, according to Holmes, is made up of two strands. The first is the 'gathering of factual materials': the documentation of a subject's life, the words, actions, places and faces through which the subject moves and interacts. The second is the 'creation of a fictional or imaginary relationship between the biographer and his subject' that is sustained by the physical journey:

[...] Not merely a 'point of view' or an 'interpretation', but a continuous living dialogue between the two as they move over the same historical ground, the same trail of events. There is between them a ceaseless discussion, a reviewing and questioning of motives and actions and consequences, a steady if subliminal exchange of attitudes, judgments and conclusions. It is fictional, imaginary, because of course the subject cannot really, literally, talk back; but the biographer must come to act and think of his subject as if he can. (Holmes 1985, p. 66)

To Holmes, the retracing of a subject's footsteps facilitates a connection through which a biographer may interact and better know his or her subject. It is a 'pursuit' where the quarry will never be caught but—should the biographer write it well enough—can be brought alive in the present (Holmes 1985, p. 27). The 'dialogue' between biographer and subject aids the creation of Olney's suggested 'new and different order of reality' where the present encroaches on the past and the past encroaches on the present. Holmes' technique allows him to juxtapose his own experience with those of his subject, and to draw out from his subjects' writing hints of autobiography. Citing the third stanza of Shelley's *Stanzas Written In Dejection, Near Naples* (1818), for example, Holmes writes that he:

[...] was convinced that here was some radical rupture in Shelley's life, his very identity—the emphatic denial of peace 'within', of 'inward' glory, of personal

affections, pleasure, love—which presented a profound biographical problem. More and more, as I followed them from house to house, city to village, river to seashore, I felt that the heart of this problem lay in the involved triangle of relations between Shelley and Mary and Claire. It came to puzzle and haunt me, with growing force, until the day I came down to San Terenzo. (Holmes 1985, p. 142)

While the geographic retracing of a subject's steps is not unusual in biography, it frequently remains unsaid, often noted in paratext or recounted in exegetical discussions separate to the biographical work. For the first volume of his *Years of Lyndon Johnson* (1982), Robert Caro moved to the Hill Country in Texas in order to better understand the life that Johnson had there. Caro's dedication was such that he slept in an open field in order to experience the isolation and loneliness that he believed the child-Johnson would have known (McGrath 2012). Now aged seventy-eight, Caro has continued to suggest that this geographic retracing, in both Vietnam and the American South, will be integral to his future work:

I want to do things with Vietnam. I want to see the jungle—feel the jungle. [...] You don't know what you're going to find out by living in a place until you live there. I don't know what I'm going to find out. [...] You have to live in the place you want to write about. (Caro, in Jackson 2012)

In a similar vein, for her biography of E.E. Cummings (2014a), Susan Cheever used this geographic retracing—where 'landscapes often speak, and houses hold ancient scenes and memories and secrets' (Cheever 2014b)—to understand the train and car accident that killed Cummings' father. 'I read everything written about the accident, yet it continued to baffle me. Why didn't Rebecca stop at the railroad crossing? How could she have missed the belching, screeching, clanking steam locomotive bearing down on her?' she asks (2014b). Only by going to the place where it happened would Cheever's questions be answered:

Once I saw the crossroads, the accident made perfect sense. The tracks were perfectly flush with the road and came toward it at a 45-degree angle from the right—Rebecca Cummings's blind side in the driver's seat, especially in the snow. I walked around a bit, noticing which of the trees were second growth and which might have been there in 1926. I could almost hear the screech of brakes from the locomotive. (Cheever 2014b)

In his biography of Kevin Rudd (2007), Nicholas Stuart noted that visiting a location where his subject had lived—in his case, Nambour and Brisbane—was important to understanding his subject:

I went up to Brisbane in early January [...] I took a lot of files and photocopies to read, and that's what I ended up spending my time doing. Basically reading and driving around, trying to get a feel for what it would have been like for him growing up. (Author's interview with subject, 4 February 2012)

For the composition of *Dutch*, Morris did retrace his subject's steps. As he noted in 2012:

I spent hours in the room where he [Reagan] was born, roamed the flat fields of his youth, waded in the Rock River [...] I stood on the stage at Eureka College where he first tasted ‘the heady wine’ of political oratory. I peeped through the windows of the West Hollywood apartment he shared with Jane Wyman (biographers do these weird things). (Morris 2012, p. 451)

And yet this process of geographic retracing, ‘weird’ as it is, was not enough for his biography. Although it allowed Morris to present mementos from those locations to his subject—‘He holds the speckled leaf in his hand, caressing its green patches with his sharp, scarred thumb [...] “Direct from Lowell Park,” I say. “Remember that big oak tree you used to sit under, when you were a lifeguard?”’ (Morris 1999, p. xi)—the knowledge and connection of location alone was not enough.

4

In two seminars given after the publication of *Dutch*, Morris raised precedents for his work on Reagan. The first precedent—an answer to the charges of narcissism and irrelevance—focused on the foregrounding of the biographer and character of Edmund Morris within the text (Morris 2012, p. 442-475). Particularly in the first half of *Dutch*, ‘Morris’ (referred to as ‘E’) is the most important character: he takes up much of the space, narrating his own life and the distant observation of Reagan. Yet this foregrounded presence recedes as the biography continues, to the point that—by the time their paths cross in 1985 (in both the biography and reality)—Reagan eclipses ‘E’ as the central figure. As Morris wrote in explanation:

E is a substantial presence early in the story only because he has to be established as a believable narrator, and because the facts known about Ronald Reagan in this period are few. *Dutch* is never aware of E’s scrutiny—at least, not until 1981. He steadily gains narrative weight, while E appears on the page less and less. Soon enough, E becomes a virtually invisible (yet always audible) member of Reagan’s audience—which widens from a few hundred in the late Twenties to tens of thousands in the mid Thirties, multiplying ultimately to hundreds of millions in the last quarter of the century. By then the biography really is me, and *Dutch* ends almost conventionally, albeit with a surprise revelation on the last page. (Morris 2012, p. 465-6)

The precedent for this initial presence was Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1992 [1791]). A landmark work, Boswell’s biography was predicated on, and is consistently funneled through, his own interactions with his subject. Produced from diary entries, transcribed (though edited) conversations, and to an extent manipulated in order to explain or evoke the years that Boswell missed (Johnson was middle aged when they met), *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is arguably a hybrid of biography and memoir. Boswell’s voice is impossible to ignore. It is garrulous and forthright, without pretense toward omniscience or comprehensiveness. Boswell reconstructed scenes that he had not been present for, and, by Reed Whittlemore’s count, of the 1,400-odd pages that make up the biography almost 1,100 appear to be journal entries and correspondence (1988, p. 127). He interferes and manipulates in the name of producing good ‘scenes’ for his biography:

I am now to record a very curious incident in Dr. Johnson's life, which fell under my own observation; and which I am persuaded will, with the liberal minded, be much to his credit. My desire of being acquainted with celebrated men of every description had made me, much about the same time, obtain an introduction to Dr. Samuel Johnson and to John Wilkes, Esq. Two men more different could perhaps not be selected out of all mankind. They had even attacked one another with some asperity in their writings; yet I lived in habits of friendship with both. [...] But I conceived an irresistible wish, if possible, to bring Dr. Johnson and Mr. Wilkes together. How to manage it, was a nice and difficult manner. (Boswell 1992 [1791], p. 671)

What is notable about Morris' citation of Boswell as a precedent for 'his' involvement is the degree to which this presence of the biographer in the text, as a heavy and guiding hand, has changed. Those working after Boswell were inclined to ape the great length of his biography but less disposed to mimic the intimacy and familiarity that characterises it. This may be attributed to a shift in attitude: Boswell's ready criticism of Johnson was thought inappropriate. As the Victorian-era biographer Margaret Oliphant argued:

If a man, on the eve of so important an undertaking, finds that the idea he has formed of the person whose good name is in his hands is an unfavourable one, and that all he can do by telling the story of his life is to lessen or destroy that good name [...] is it in such a case his duty to speak at all? [...] In this case his plain duty would be to refrain. (Oliphant 1883, p. 90-91)

This attitude became the norm. Biography took on 'an older, reverential mode' (Pimlott 1990, p. 217), manifest in 'large, unimaginative and often multi-volumed' (Harrison 2003, p. 1) accounts of a subject's life that did not so much illustrate the person as entomb them. According to Matthew Ricketson, by the late Victorian-era, biography was a 'stagnant pond' where a veil was drawn around a subject's private life and the instruction of their virtues was the paramount convention (2004, p. 5). Although this convention was to weaken with the publication of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), it's arguably the case that in political biography—particularly those produced in the United States—this convention of respectful distance endured. In Ted Sorenson's biography of Kennedy (1965), for example, the use of the first-person pronoun remains fleeting throughout. Despite Sorenson's long acquaintance with Kennedy, his use of that intimacy remains distant: the biography is arguably inflected by familiarity, but rarely stated outright. And yet, as a technique by which to write biography, the use of intimacy and familiarity is a standard trope, particularly for those biographers working with live subjects. In Australia, Don Watson's *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart* (2012 [2002]) works as both memoir and biography. Watson eschews a magisterial perspective in favour of an insider's—what he describes as 'not a black-box but a hand-held camera', or 'on the deck of the *Pequod*, not halfway up the mast or trailing in a whaleboat' (2012, p. 735, 739). The presence of the biographer is readily admitted, and works to resolve the inherent tension that Watson argues is present in magisterial accounts written by intimates:

The elevated or omniscient third-person narrative demands an artificial logic for events that are often random and subjective: and when participants in those events do

this, the most skillful and unflinching practitioners risk losing some of the truth—and the life—of the politics to which they were privy. (Watson 2012, p. 737-8)

For Morris, the obvious presence of the biographer in the text had precedent—but largely (only) for the real-life presence that Morris had had in Reagan's life.

5

How to justify the use of fiction, then? Morris' insertion of himself as a fictionalised narrator—born in 1912 in Illinois, slightly melancholic, and (as we find out) one of the seventy-seven people saved by Reagan during his time as a lifeguard; when in real life Morris was born in 1940 in Kenya and wasn't saved by Reagan—is, he argued, the only fictionalised part of the book. It is only the perspective that is fictional.

In a defense of his biography, Morris notes precedents for the mix of 'fictive' elements with those of non-fiction. Daniel Defoe regularly published obviously fictional works—such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)—as non-fiction, as works of memoir. For Defoe, the distinction was non-existent: as he said with apparent seriousness, 'I am Robinson Crusoe' (cited in Morris 2012, p. 457).

In *Some People* (2011 [1926]), the biographer Harold Nicolson had used fictional characters in real situations and real people in fictional settings. The contradictions are many: the book was published and is classified as non-fiction. Nicolson warns his readers that 'Many of the following sketches are purely imaginary', yet immediately makes a point of introducing a caveat: 'Such truths as they may contain are only half-truths' (2011, p. iv). That caveat, as his son Nigel has argued, may be attributed to Nicolson's attempt to portray his own intellectual and emotional development, as personified in the characters contained within the book (cited in Monk 2007, p. 3). In particular, Nicolson's depiction of a fictional butler at the conference of Lausanne in 1922-3 was disguised autobiography: Nicolson had attended the conference. The real-life figures depicted in the book—such as Lord Curzon and Benito Mussolini—appear quite authentic. The fiction is disciplined by attention to observed detail.

Morris has argued that the use of an imagined perspective in his biography, disciplined by scholarship and research, is not, therefore, a controversial nor especially new technique. He invokes a difference between imagination and invention (2012, p. 442-475), justified by the requirement to create Olney's 'new and entirely different order of reality'.

What I did have, perhaps in risky excess, was the ability to evoke *temps perdu*. If I disciplined that power with scholarship, telling not a thing about him [Reagan] that was not documented, why should I not make my literary self old enough to have 'lived' a life parallel with his, and write about him as observantly in the Twenties or Forties or Sixties? Could I not then justifiably publish a biography entitled *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*? (Morris 2012, p. 452)

This, then, is the nub of the problem. Some critics have rubbished his justification: as one put it to Morris, ‘Historians feel you’ve polluted the purity of scholarship by pissing fiction into it, novelists think you want it both ways, and wonks can’t forgive you for believing that the story of a man’s life is more important than policy’ (cited in Morris 2012, p. 445). Yet fiction, in this case, offered Morris a way into his subject—and shone light on the problem of recreating, as outlined by journalist Robert Littell’s suggestion that the difference between the biographer and the novelist is ‘not quite as real as it seems’ (1925, p. 112).

6

The last question that Morris poses in the above excerpt is perhaps the most problematic. Although Morris has suggested that there was an understanding between them that Reagan would publish his post-presidential memoir first (2012, p. 450), the clear expectation of journalists and scholars was that Morris’ biography of Reagan would be ‘one of those solemn Washington books a thousand pages long, with a glossy red-white-and-blue jacket and the word *power* somewhere in the title’ (Morris 2012, p. 452), likely as not full of gossip, revelation, and magisterial study (in the end, those journalists and scholars only had to wait a year or so more for Lou Cannon to weigh in with the six-hundred page *Governor Reagan: His Rise To Power* (2001)). Such a biography would have made full use of the access and co-operation that Morris had been granted. Morris’ decision to eschew orthodox biographical techniques in favour of a technique at once radical and traditional, that did not arguably utilise that access to its best extent, aroused derision and outrage. As Nigel Hamilton put it, Morris’ desire to expand and adapt the biography form was opposite to what his audience wanted: it was ‘a form of professional suicide’ (2008, p. 53) alleviated only by Morris’ return to orthodoxy in his subsequent *Theodore Rex* (2001).

But the expectation of those journalists and scholars are worth probing. Australian academic James Walter suggests that answering ‘who owns the life?’ is initially ‘self-evident’ (2006, p. 29) but quickly complicated by interaction with and a growing awareness of stakeholders. In political biography, those stakeholders are arguably more general than elsewhere: they extend to every member of the general public who may have their own idea of the subject. As Walter writes about his biography of Whitlam (1980):

It was always my view that the stakeholders I was writing for were not the party, and certainly not the leader and acolytes, or the families for that matter. I was writing for the rest of us who may have voted for them, or engaged with them, or possibly even opposed them—but whose lives had been in some way affected. (Walter 2006, p. 32)

In the composition of *Dutch*, Morris was wrestling not only with a degree of access denied to almost anyone else but also with a ‘seriously important president’ (Morris 2012, p. 446), invested with immense cultural and political importance by a public that had sent him twice to the White House; a political party for whom Reagan would become an icon; and a publisher that had paid a large advance to have a book about.

As Emily Bauman furthermore points out, Morris' adoption of fictional techniques represented a challenge to the American political biography's 'ideology of form', in which 'survivalist, entrepreneurial narratives grounded in a belief in self-made individualism' were the norm (2009, p. 660). Presenting multiple voices and styles of prose—including scripts, letters, poetry, stream-of-consciousness, memoirs—as well as visual imagery, Morris deliberately attempted to expand and adapt the range of biography to include techniques of storytelling more commonly associated with fiction. Simultaneously, he used those new ranges to mirror and depict the Reagan that he knew and was aware of: 'an author partly writing his own narrative,' as Bauman puts it (2009, p. 661).

Does this expansion matter, then, for the reader of *Dutch*?

In a speech given prior to publication, Morris suggests that biography is closely allied to portrait photography, in that its basic composition is determined by reality. But, he argues, 'reality cannot be truthfully represented without honest distortions' (2012, p. 158). In *Dutch*, Morris confines these distortions to perspective only: as the publisher's note says, 'All the words (written or spoken) of Ronald Reagan, all his recounted thoughts and acts, and indeed those of every historical character in the text, are matters of fact and of record' (Morris 1999, p. iv). On the dust jacket of the first edition, Morris and his publisher are upfront about the fictionalised narrator:

Morris's biographical mind becomes in effect another character in the narrative, recording long-ago events with the same eyewitness vividness (and absolute documentary fidelity) with which the author later describes the great dramas of Reagan's presidency, and the tragedy of a noble life now darkened by dementia (Morris 1999, dust jacket)

Yet aside from this easily lost component of the book, there is little to suggest that Morris has distorted anything. How is the reader, in the absence of the dust jacket, to know? Is the question even that important?

Morris suggests that it is not: 'Readers could either buy this *Döppelgängerisch* narrative structure or not. But if they *did* suspend their disbelief enough to read the first two chapters [...] I hoped that they might be drawn irresistibly into the story, much as the real author was drawn into it himself' (2012, p. 465). Morris' emphasis of story is key: it is the 'different and entirely new order of reality' that Olney suggested must be present for a life which is past to be recreated.

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