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Narrating 20th Century European Lives
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Portraiture and Re-portraiture
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Biography as a Genre and as
a Deconstructive Technique

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Biographical fascination and illusion

There are biographies here, there and everywhere, and the list is growing. In spite of this cornucopia of biographies we see the academia, especially in the Scandinavian countries hesitate accepting or dealing with the biography as a genre. So, let us try to define: what is a biography? The short answer is that it is a description of a life, bios graphein, written by someone other than the person who lived the life. A biography is a telling of a life. In contradistinction to an autobiography. And in contradistinction to a lived life.

Given the validity of this definition the long answer is that the genre has a lengthy history, going right back to Antiquity; that the genre during the centuries has served many purposes vis-à-vis its readers; that the genre is like a bar of soap slipping from our grasp when we pick it up; that the genre shares borders with many a branch of learning and cuts across specialisation; that the biographical genre has a robust tradition of gender imbalance, which was

first broached in the twentieth century; and last, but not least that the genre has a tradition of presenting a cohesive picture of life, but is today open, polyphonic and speaks with many voices. Biography deals with lives lived by individuals, and therefore exercises a strong fascination. But can we allow this fascination to be unreflective when it has long since been recognised that the linear life story is a construction in need of epistemological analysis, as demonstrated by Pierre Bourdieu in his 1986 landmark article *L’Illusion biographique*? Bourdieu maintained that the biographical construction of separate events in a chronological sequence bears an inescapable similarity to the *bildungsroman* of the literary agenda, in which the lived life is rendered on a model of linear, subjectivised – and objectivised – coherence. Bourdieu rightly disputes that this construction might well be worthy of preservation in terms of aesthetics, but that it is not worthy in terms of theory or scholarship.

Does this mean that, in a scholarly context, biography should thus be passed over? Is a biography only a biography if its intention is to follow the progression of a life? Can an individual’s undertakings, thoughts and feelings be reconstructed from one end to the other in a biography substantiated by simple reference to the beginning of life at birth and the end at death? Can a life be reconstructed without deconstructing the supposition that this life has an underlying coherence? Does time, in itself, create narrative? Do biographers employ a chronological narrative technique – from one end to the other? The answers are just as complex as the process of writing a biography. The biographer does not have to spend much time with her or his material before it becomes apparent that the idea of using the sequence of the life story as the basis for a biographical interpretation is not workable. This is nothing new. In the 16th century, Michel de Montaigne pointed out the inconsistencies in


every individual's life, just as Chateaubriand in the 19th century stated that the individual did not have just one, but many lives.

It is precisely this inconsistency, paradox and ambivalence which, to my mind, makes for the fascination of the genre and for the history of the Individual. Writing of this fascination 250 years ago, Samuel Johnson, the biographer who also had a biography written about him, claimed: 'No species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition.' Despite Johnson's claim, the biography enthralled in its compelling tales of life, but provides only diffuse guidance as to how life should be tackled, given that circumstances differ and can change radically over the course of a lifetime. Biographers have been aware of this ever since the Renaissance saw the stirrings of a biographical form endeavouring to encompass a rounded character. This type of biography evolved from the Enlightenment by way of the 18th-century preoccupation with the bourgeois individual's development seen in a Romantic-evolutionary light. At the beginning of the 20th century, the modern, 'revelatory' or demythologising life story was introduced by the Bloomsbury group, starting with Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*.

6. Samuel Johnson in *The Rambler* no. 60, 1750, cited in: P. France and W. St Clair (eds.), *Mapping Lives*, New York 2002, p. 3. James Boswell wrote *The Life of Samuel Johnson* in 1791; this biography is still considered to be the pioneering work of study into the process of intellectual and character development and in the identification of threads between a life's work in the public arena and its anchorage in a private life, based as it was on a huge amount of empirical material comprising letters, interviews, literary and private documents.
7. This is a somewhat contrary discussion about life coherence than presented in L. W. Banner, "Biography as History", *American Historical Review*, vol. 3, 2009, pp. 579-586.
The new aspect of biography today, however, is neither its diversity nor its cornucopia of publications. Innovation comes by way of the complex choreography, reflection and research applied to the biographical genre. This development was brought about by the gradual post-war paradigm shift from modernism to post-modernism. In this transformation, autobiography and biography were key battlefields on which the struggle between old and new was fought out. Inspiration was gleaned from complex literature such as Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* whether history is made by individuals, famous and anonymous alike. In advanced biographical research, the question today is not how the individual life is read in or behind the work. Modernistic concepts such as identity, truth and development have been challenged and set in motion; where answers were previously sought to the question of the person behind the myth, or endeavours were made to reconstruct an individual’s life and work in a search for ‘the truth’ about this individual’s ‘identity’, the issue now is how the individual constructs personal experience or is constructed via others’ stories and via other tracks than their own. Where, for example, the new criticism employed in comparative literature considered interest to be centred on the work rather than the life that had created it, the focus is now on uncovering, not the person, but ‘the textural structures which construct — or fail to construct — the I that belongs to the narrator’, as expressed by the Swedish professor of literature Lisbeth Larsson in her study of biography and autobiography, *Samning och konsekvens* [Truth and Consequence], 2001.3 With the research-based biography’s vigorous experimentation and expansion in the historical, literary, aesthetic, theological and sociological disciplines, we find a valid wish not just to incorporate passions, irrationalities and human idiosyncrasies in the decoding of a life’s work, but also to see truth, identity and memory as historically-determined constructions rather than as concepts with a fundamental nucleus.

Thus, today biography is more than ever both a narrative and an analytical genre. It is not a case of either-or:

In recent decades, biographical research, as well as research into autobiographies, has been part of the extensive critique of the so-called Grand Theories about Humankind, History, the Individual and the Truth. The joint critique of these concepts, their dissolution and their new definition as epistemologically historically-determined constructions has, however, served two in principle completely contradictory purposes. On the one hand, deconstructive, given that the concept is drained and dissolved. On the other hand, one that could be described as reconstructive, given that the concept's diverse implications are demonstrated in relation to the formerly alleged homogeneity, and given that the biographical texts were used to show that there are other stories, other individuals and other truths than those which were formerly sanctioned.¹¹

There continues to be an expressed intellectual need for open reflection on pictures of living individuals' search for a point of orientation in life – a need to read another person's life as a form of 'Owner's Manual'.¹² But interest now moves on to a need to see the long and complex biographical process as being authorisation of the legitimacy of the stories told about the individual in question. Not as a writer's quest to legitimise the actions or works of the central character, but as a biographer's orientation instrument in complex interpretations of time: 'The object of study for the new biographers is not just the construction of identities but also and inevitably, the contested nature of inventing selves.'¹³

10. Grand Theories mean in this connection the ideologies of the 20th century such as liberalism, communism and socialism.
Fiction writers can create coherence and identities; they can also construct various identities for the same central character. The Norwegian writer Jan Kjærstad did just this in his celebrated trilogy about Jonas Wergeland, using three different versions of the same man. He created a fictional coherence in an individual’s life (Forføreren 1993, Erøbreren 1996, Oppdageren 1999; in English: The Seducer 2003, The Conqueror 2007, The Discoverer, 2008).

Can a scholarly historian, littérature, anthropologist or scholar in the humanities do the same thing, based on sources from documented reality, on empirical studies of historical figures who have actually lived. As far as I have been informed by the editors, this is one of the purposes of this anthology, namely to show how lives can be deconstructed, and how biographical research can be used to tell new versions of mainstream history. Another question is about historical biographies’ possibility of having scholarly legitimacy and at the same time having a narrative function? In academic circles, some will claim that this is so while others will chime the death knell – over and over, according to my own survey over the literature and the research debate in the Scandinavian countries. But the urge to prove oneself in the genre is strong, in academia too, and it is not unusual to see several biographers applying themselves to the same principal character; prominent national and major international figures often inspire the attention of a number of biographers. We frequently hear that now the ‘definitive’ biography of Churchill, Hitler or Queen Victoria has been written. In Denmark, three biographies of Churchill were published within the space of three years: Statsmand og myte [Statesman and Myth],14 and translations of Churchill: A Life15 and Churchill: A Biography.16 But which is the most ultimate? None of them – because biographies are always a mirror of their times, their biographer and their readers.

Biographical narrativity: reconstruction or deconstruction?

Is it good or bad that biography is everywhere said to be a story that starts in the cradle and ends on the brink of the grave? The Danish historian Jens Christian Manniche has suggested: "[...] actually, the biggest problem of the biography is perhaps the perceived biographical convention that an individual's life has to have coherence." His book on Anna Hude, the first female historian and D.Phil. (doctor philosophiae) in Denmark, was at first turned down by a commercial publishing house for being too fragmentary and ambiguous. The editorial consultant had asked for a picture showing the coherence of Hude's life, but biographer Manniche could not see any coherent whole. In rejecting the manuscript, the consultant wrote that the contemporary reader insisted on coherence in a life story, and went on:

That is [...] why biographies, fictional biographies and historical novels are so popular. Every individual interprets his or her own life, more or less consciously, and makes for a coherence which is perhaps present, perhaps not. And we read these books for the sake of recognition, to find structures that can explain, create purpose and meaning in what appears to be random.

A desire to create something that does not exist. Eventually, however, Manniche's book was published – by Gad publishing house – and it was praised to the skies!

Nevertheless, biographers persist in constructing a thread which runs through a postulated cradle-to-grave coherence. We create a construction – not because of, but in spite of the life story it is telling. But who is to say that in the life as lived there was one destiny that created purpose, meaning, coherence? One destiny that can be

18. Manniche, "Om biografi".
read biographically in retrospect and explain the life? Well, ye-e-s ...
Kirkegaard summed it up: 'life is lived forwards and understood
backwards.' And we are all on Freud's tail - brought up believing it.
But what if we anchor biography in a life-story context that is not
one of continuity, but of rupture and complexity? Should we then
keep up the biographical convention - or should we make room for
other perceptions? Can the biography's scholarly legitimacy in the
21st century be found in interpretations that are open, documenting
ambiguity in text and sources, constructing a narrative without an
unequivocal linearity? In other words: putting the reader to work?

It is, of course, a postmodernist question. And yet ...! Ambigu-
ity has been an element of human interpretation for longer than we
would like to think. Five hundred years ago, an elderly Montaigne
wrote in his essay 'Of the Inconsistency of our Actions':

Such as make it their business to oversee human actions,
do not find themselves in anything so much perplexed as
to reconcile them and bring them into the world's eye with
the same lustre and reputation; for they commonly so
strangely contradict one another that it seems impossible
they should proceed from one and the same person.19

Chateaubriand - the Romantic ego above all Romantic egos - wrote
in the 19th century: "Man has not one and the same life. He has
many lives, placed end to end, and that is the cause of his misery."20
Nonetheless, countless biographies tell the story of a life going for-
wards, without explaining it going backwards - or from the side.
This is not hard to understand: narrative theorists tell us that sto-
ries might well be read sequentially, but they are interpreted and
comprehended retrospectively. It is the end that makes sense of the
beginning and the story as such; i.e. in a good story, it is not un-
til the end that the story reveals its overall significance. The ending,
the main idea, the plot - all in all, are prerequisites for the creation

19. Montaigne, Essays, p. 9
20. Chateaubriand (1768-1848) was
the exponent par excellence of
self-awareness in French Romanti-
cism. The citation is taken from
Auster The Book of Illusions.
of a story. But when the historical biography is told step by step as a chronological story, then it is, so to speak, an unfinished narrative — and, as such, meaningless. Unless it has a contention — an interpretation.

And if it has a meaning — an interpretation — then it also has a thread running through it; most historians have learnt this technique from the littérateurs. The biography stage manages the past and commits itself to an explanation along the lines of: it happened like it happened because it happened like it happened — because the story, the narrative exposition, has direction and coherence vis-à-vis where it ends. The Danish politician and former prime minister Jens Otto Krag (1914-1978) did not succeed as an artist, the painter or writer he aspired to be, because he was a politician. Because he made the wrong choice when his days as an active politician came to an end. Then he had to succumb to drink, which eventually killed him. And here I am not only alluding to the interpretation made by his celebrated biographer, Bo Lidegaard, but to the construal of most biographers. The story is predetermined because the ending is known in advance; see also the chapter by Laursen and Wiium Olesen for a case discussion of this. This kind of predetermination will be at stake, too, even if the biographer has gone behind the myth of ‘great lives’ and has demythologised the individual life, as I myself did 19 years ago in relation to the pioneering Danish educationalist Natalie Zahle (1827-1913). The objective and function of the Natalie Zahle biography was partly to open up a life and times universe across a whole century, to be the catalyst for a story that had not been written, and partly to reveal the person behind the myth. The myth of an individual who embarked upon an enterprise rooted in divine inspiration, and who started from scratch. And, instead, to understand her as a bearer and breaker of cultural rules, as a woman who suffered misgivings and sorrows along the route of her journey. As the pioneer who, on a private basis, founded a

22. Possing, Viljens Styrke.
school empire, who designed educational models and the prototype of a state school system destined to operate far into the future. It was a unique achievement for a woman working within a Victorian environment. She created an organisation that required her to exercise power and authority over her surroundings. This needed to be explained: she was both hero and villain. Just that single demythologisation was new in itself, but it also generated a new – feminist – myth, because we knew the ending. During her lifetime the ending was, of course, unknown. She had always had the option of marriage – and seeing her creation fall to pieces. Or she could have gone to live in Russia – and written herself out of the history. But that about which we have no knowledge cannot amount to anything other than speculation in a historical biography. So how can we postulate linearity if it was not to be found in the lived, empirical life? If life and work was too complex, contradictory and catch napping (= surprising) to foresee?

Quite another question which is not to be developed here is the question about ethics. The act of writing a biography, an intellectual juggling act with destinies, involves not only documentary and narrative challenges. Furthermore, it involves ethical challenges – if, that is, the biography is to be scholarship rather than fiction. The challenges of an ethical and methodological nature arise from the role of the biographer as arbiter of the life of an individual who is defenceless. If biographers wish to uphold the humanist project, respect for the dignity of others, how far is it then possible to go\(^3\) as regards crossing boundaries set by individuals to their private lives, for example. In the scholarly genre we learn to reveal hidden truths. But what should we do with evidence of private and ethical issues which the individual in question has chosen to erase and thus delete from any potential future reference? Should this wish be respected or not in a time and period of world history where the boundary between private and public has shifted so radically as is

the case with those spheres during the last 50 years? I just have to be content with the statement that the biographer’s ethical respect towards the protagonist is an issue that has to be seriously considered over and over again when facing the actual protagonist of the biography. But the question of biographical ethics is a subject upon which one should develop a series of arguments which I am doing in another work to be published in a near future. Here, I will just underline that this is an important issue that any scholarly biographer needs to consider. Also the question of the selection of sources and the documentary fundament of the biographical reconstruction and narrative is a classical ethical one within the biographical genre. Virginia Woolf’s comments on biography have been quoted countless times; when writing a biography of her late friend Roger Fry, she wondered: ‘How can one make a life out of six cardboard boxes full of tailors’ bills, lovers’ letters and old picture postcards?’ And she asked: ‘What are you really like?’ Put a little crudely: if she told a good story, she was interpreting a possibly non-existent direction followed by a life; if there was no direction, it was a bad biography. The answer to that question is not simple – and it is not just necessarily one of coherence.

The renewed interest in biography has been seen by many over the last decade as something of a humanistic reaction against the postmodern, fragmented subject. But more and more biographers are abandoning the endeavour to identify coherence. Instead, the approach is given a different slant, as described by the American historian Jo Burr Margadent: ‘The subject of biography is no longer the coherent self but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves.’ The convention of coherence is questioned. The reconstruction of a coherent life story is deconstructed.


Biographical polyphony

Biography has thus acquired new significance. Denmark in the early 1990s witnessed a robust public debate about the relevance and role of the personality in history, inspired by my biography of Natalie Zahle. The public debate blew up again in the early years of the new century following the publication of the theologian Joakim Garff’s biography of Søren Kirkegaard.26 In both cases, the arguments of the debate were focused on the interpretation of the protagonist and her/his impact on and influence the national Danish identity. Or in general, the role of the individual personality in history compared to structures and ideologies. In the 1990s we saw a huge public enthusiasm as a welcoming reaction on the re-writing of Natalie Zahle into Scandinavian history. In 2003-04 the opposite issue was at stake, when a critic of the Kierkegaard biography claimed the (copy)right of ‘the truth’ and ‘the true’ interpretation of the protagonists’ actions and thoughts as a national figure. Why was the tone so vehement? I believe that it was not only due to the status of Zahle and Kierkegaard as Danish national icons. The discussions were robust because the biography is ‘historiography’s humanistic primary genre’, as the Swedish professor Göran B. Nilsson has called it.27

In other European countries it is the pioneering nature of biographical research which wins particular recognition. A central aspect to the discussion was inspired by David Macey, author of biographies of Lacan and Foucault, who invented the concept of compartmentalisation.28 In this view, 20th-century cultural liberation of the modern individual is seen to have liberated identity. One individual’s many identities provide the potential for changing track in the course of a lifetime. In his biography of Michel Foucault

(1993), Macey showed that Foucault lived many lives – an academic, a political activist, a child and a homosexual. Biographer David Macey is challenged by the multiplicity in Foucault’s life, because the range of elements made it difficult to reach any satisfactory periodisation of his work. The concept of compartmentalisation reflected the fact that modernity gave humankind the opportunity to have one identity at the workplace, another in a minority culture, a third in the family, a fourth in a sports setting or political context etc. Each identity could have its specific signals and attire, and no single culture was overarching for the individual’s inclusive identity. Consequently, a biography can be seen in contexts other than the chronological. Foucault himself was amused to note that he was perceived as anarchist, Marxist and anti-Marxist, ultra- and neoliberal and Gaullist technocrat etc.: ‘It’s true that I prefer not to identify myself and that I’m amused by the diversity of the ways I’ve been judged and classified.’

A number of biographers have abandoned the cradle-to-grave convention and taken a particularised approach in order to confront the complexity: for example, Stephen Walton on Ivar Aasen, Yvonne Hirdman on Alva Myrdal, Toril Moi on Simone de Beauvoir, Seyla Benhabib on Hannah Arendt, and myself on Bodil Koch. With this individualisation, the biographical genre has acquired a new productive layer – it has become a prism for a multitude of specialities; it has been post-modernised. Today, the theoretical bearings of a scholarly biography within the humanities have to be interdisciplinary, navigating through literature, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and possibly theology and art history. Also needed is an empirical corpus comprising analysis of texts, pictures and sources. There are thus considerations of both theoretical and methodological nature that are bound to ap-

29. Macey, Lives of Michel Foucault.
30. S.J. Walton, Ivar Aasens kropp, Oslo 1996; S.J. Walton, Skaff deg et liv! Om biografi, Oslo 1998;
ply regardless of whether the biographer is a literary or a political historian, and whether the biographer is an author or a politician.

And what do I mean by that? The protagonist of our biographies is and has been a fully nuanced human personality in real life – and thus cannot be phrased in a one-dimensional literary, anthropological, psychological or another disciplinary frame without losing some dimensions of his or her life. So, the best biographies are the ones that open up the biographical analysis understanding the individual from different disciplinary angles. When I wrote my first Natalie Zahle biography, for instance, I was aware of painting her into a social, private, cultural, educational and even political context, but on the other hand I had to be painfully aware that I did not approach her as a theologian researcher. I had to realize the limits of my theologian skills at that moment.

Later, when I published the biography on the internationally well known Danish Minister of Cultural and Ecclesiastical Affairs Bodil Koch (1903-72), the situation was different. In this case, I had to include the theologian approach, because Bodil Koch’s religious feelings and understandings were extremely important in order to understand her national visions of international relations and foreign politics. In my biography on her, it was not that imperative to include an interpretation of her private life as it was in the understanding of the pedagogic pioneer Natalie Zahle, because Zahle had been unable to succeed in building her educational school empire, had it not been for the special construction of her social families.\footnote{B. Possing, *Awakening the Promise of the Soul*, Copenhagen 2001.}

As for Bodil Koch, though, the understanding of her private life was less important to the understanding of her public career than her religious beliefs. So, as a biographer I had to educate myself within theology in order to understand and analyse the theologian issues. Working with disciplines that are new for the biographer and in which the biographer is not educated or skilled, it is necessary to read a lot, but also to test the approach among more skilled colleagues. Being a more experienced historical biographer it is easier to deal with a broad series of disciplines within the humanities and
social sciences that should be needed for a well situated biography. The important point is that the protagonist of a biography is not to become a victim of a pedagogic game that the biographer plays, framing him or her in a narrow one-dimensional disciplinary thinking. After all, the scholarly educated biographer should be able to develop a cross disciplinary methodological approach in order to understand the personality and the protagonist of the biography.

Most biographers operate with at least three basic ingredients: an individual, the (life's) work and the times – attributing them widely different prominence. The biography as a genre gives the biographer scope to feel privileged and to crisscross; and to develop the intellectual scope to surmount narrow specialisms. This liberates the biographical research, enabling it to pursue many directions, albeit the chronological convention is tenacious. Innovation is on its way – and often it comes from the feminist approach. Rising numbers of scholarly biographies are being written by women, which will perhaps change some perspectives in the gender imbalance. The historical biography as genre was previously dominated by men writing about statesmen, financiers or male scientists. Ten years ago, only 8% of biographies had female protagonists and only 4% were written by female biographers, if the review sections in European and US historical journals are to be believed. Changes have been afoot during the last 20-30 years, and that is not to be sneered at, because we have to go all the way back to 79 BC to find the single swallow, Chinese Liu Xiang, who in Biographies des femmes illustres showed that female personalities could also be worthy of biography. The interesting renewals and new perspectives in the historical biographical genre have come from feminist biographies because biographers have to include new views and new understandings to recognise, visualize and reconstruct female lives in history because of the simple fact that women have been differently situated in history than men.


33. Lui Xiang, Lienü zhuan, BC 79-78. Translated into French by M. Kaltemark, Biographies des femmes illustres, Peking 1953.
Biographical deconstruction and alternative stories

A biography might have many functions. The biography can function as catalyst for something else, something that could be difficult to extrapolate: an alternative story. A biography is constituted by the coherences of the biographer’s choice: the theologian and music expert Jørgen I. Jensen wrote a biography of Carl Nielsen34 which would be over in the first two lines of page 1, with Carl Nielsen’s birth on June 9, 1865 and death on October 3, 1931, if it had been a cradle-to-grave life story. Nevertheless, Jensen wrote a learned biography, more than 500 pages, about religious yearnings, audience attitudes, crises and conflicts both private and international, in the social order of which he was a part. When biography is viewed from this vantage point, it becomes a polyphonic genre with endless potential to understand life, work and times: a genre going beyond traditional academic disciplines; a genre that is thematic, analytical and narrative. Modernistic concepts such as truth, identity and development are thus irrelevant in relation to the protagonist. It is a case of deconstruction – and reconstruction. By means of biographical texts, it can be shown that there are other accounts, other individuals and other truths than those which were formerly attributed credence.35

My last book about Bodil Koch, the former Danish Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs and Minister of Cultural Affairs, titled Uden omsvøb [To the Point. An Incisive Portrait],36 endeavours to deconstruct the stories told about her in Danish and international history – and to reconstruct alternative stories dealing with religion, feminism, culture, foreign and domestic policy. The stories are documented in an abundance of sources, but told in my interpretation. The biography does not start in the cradle and does not postulate

36. Possing, Uden omsvøb.
linearity of direction in her life. It seeks answers to the conundrum as to the efficacy of her voice and her efforts – for her personally, for her contemporaries, and for the generations to come. It seeks clarification as to why she was perceived as provocative, impulsive, gifted and naïve – at one and the same time. And it seeks an explanation as to why she has been so ineptly represented in Danish and international historiography alike when she was actually well-known around the world for her robust and intellectual critique of the Cold War division of nations into two blocs, East and West. She was an internationalist, travelled the globe and would rather ‘thaw out than freeze’. A photograph of Bodil Koch – wearing evening gown, string of pearls, brandishing cigar, finger raised – remonstrating vehemently with the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, during the NATO conference hosted by the Danish government in Copenhagen in 1958, was circulated throughout the world’s media. His expression was one of surprise and consternation: was this a woman or a man with cigar and pearl necklace? Was this Danish minister, who criticised the US and his foreign policy, a friend or foe of NATO?

The book places this construal of Bodil Koch within the analytic framework of two paintings of her made in the same year. They were titled, respectively, *Vision i rødt* [Vision in Red] and *De lukkede øjne* [The Closed Eyes], and both were painted by the Danish painter Kirsten Kjær – but they show completely different interpretations of the sitter. First Kirsten Kjær painted *De lukkede øjne*, which is a portrait of a despairing woman, in pastel shades, with an anaemic, introverted expression. Her eyes are actively closed, but the portrait expresses yearning and inward-looking despair. Bodil Koch hated this portrait, which the artist, on the other hand, saw as her truth about the sitter. Madam Minister of Church Affairs demanded repaint. A re-portrayal. For the first and only time in her career, Kirsten Kjær conceded and painted another portrait. This one was *Vision i rødt*, which showed the sitter in an eruption of colour, red, yellow and green – a woman poised for action and on the alert, with a focussed gaze, but nonetheless with a body that exploded and scattered and was full of holes.
*Uden omsvæb* deals with re-portrayal. Re-portrayal means questioning the former portraits and narratives of the protagonist looking for new empirically situated contexts, new and non-chronological angles in describing, reading and understanding the individual, acting protagonist from concrete situations, thus shedding new light on a well-known personality. I find the concept of re-portrayal extremely relevant in the making of new political biographies of nationally situated, but internationally oriented protagonists as Bodil Koch. Because she, being an outspoken Protestant and a Danish national, democratic representative, insisted on questioning the given order of international politics. Thus, she was an unusual political figure: She was a modernist that claimed that the given political order had to be questioned again and again. She did not want to be categorized only as a Danish Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, because she involved foreign politics, art and cultural politics, democracy and technology in the global society. She claimed that international affairs were and should be the fundament of all politics. So, to understand her as a political individual, as a biographer I realized that I had to do the thinking and analysis of intersectionality, of transnational understanding and on the personal scale – of a certain degree of compartmentalisation. I had to focus on the crossing of borders, be it within politics, nations, ideologies, life spheres or sections. This is what the methods of re-portrayal are about. It would certainly not have been possible to explain the life-long advanced and Socratic effort of Bodil Koch in neither national nor international politics if you had not integrated the understanding of her un-pragmatic combination of a social liberal, democratic humanistic, protestantic, feminist and politically naïve.

So, my biography on her seeks out the stories between the two portraits of my protagonist, between Bodil Koch and the extreme stances of the Cold War and the battle to win over hearts and minds. It searches for what Bodil Koch saw as “rupture of form” in art, in modernity – and in humankind. Via forensic investigation of manifold source material and, not least, the holes in this material, the book centres on the picture between the two portraits and during
the Cold War’s extreme debates on modernity and power over mindset. The re-portrayal deals with why Bodil Koch became a controversial critic of her own government’s foreign policy, and of the Church for which she was the government minister, and of the women for whom she was the feminist, and of the democracy she loved, and of the Cold War spirit which travelled with her, and of the family in which she was mother and wife. I approach Bodil Koch from the outside – devise a strategy – and examine her objective. On the intellectual and political level, her ambition would seem to be a vision of humanistic democracy which was not only in permanent motion, but which developed by means of paradoxical thinking and confrontation. And on the human, personal level, it would seem she aspired to that which in her own life she endeavoured to cover up, hide and remove from the public arena. This had a democratic function publicly, but came at a high price privately.

With this approach to a biographical portrait of a complex personality, my intention is to show that political biography can still retain its power to fascinate even when life and work are analysed thematically by means of a number of stories crisscrossing the chronological sequence of a life as lived. The objective has been to show that this construction can come close to a complex and stratified response to a series of precisely posed questions – possibly to an even greater degree than a chronologically structured biography can, given that the portrait here focuses on ruptures and dramatic confrontations as well as a smooth sequential narrative of single events. It can, however, be difficult to trace and describe the coherence of a life story which might indeed exist even though it cannot be seen in the conventional positivist sense. But why not take up this challenge?

Doing so as a biographer, you might present a ‘ruptured’ biography of a life that contained several directions, but in certain historical cases, this might be the most appropriate response to the challenge.
Conclusions

In this article I have argued that the biographical genre is a genre of its own right, and that it should be treated and looked upon as a genre. I have argued that scholarly educated biographers to a still greater degree realize that the genre in modern and postmodern times is characterized by complexity in form, structure and aims. The living political biography of today is both a narrative and an analytic genre where the conventional coherence of biographical, chronological life-linearity of the individual protagonist is questioned. The cradle-to-grave perspective of a biography still being a living convention within the genre, the experiments of understanding a life story and its context as one of rupture and complexity began to be practised to a great degree through the twentieth century, and now at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, during the époque we see that changes are afoot in the male-dominated biographical genre; we now see more biographies with female protagonists – and more biographies written by female biographers. Last, but not least the concepts of intersectionality and social constructivist re-portrayal have been introduced in the historical biographical genre taking its first tender steps, and this – the making of a biography, the telling of a life – might lead to an even more fascinating and complex challenge than ever before. But, I suppose, this is a consequential reflection of the complexities for the living individual personalities in real life.
Abbreviations in the text

BN  Bekende Nederlander
BTO  Brussels Treaty
CDU  Christian Democratic Union in the Federal Republic of Germany
CHR  UN Commission on Human Rights
CIE  Confédération internationale des étudiants
DWNC  Danish Women’s National Council
EC  European Communities
ECHR  European Convention of Human Rights
ECSC  European Coal and Steel Community
EDC  European Defence Community
EFTA  European Free Trade Association
EP  European Parliament
EPA  European Planning Authority
ERC  European Reconstruction Corporations
EU  European Union
EUI  European University Institute
Euratom  European Atomic Energy Community
HR  Human Rights
ICW  International Council of Women
ILO  International Labour Organisation
IWA  Icelandic Women’s Association
LGA  League General Assembly
MEP  Member of the European Parliament
NAA  North Atlantic Assembly
NATO  North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NS  National Socialist
NSDAP  National Socialist Party
OECEC  Organisation for European Economic Cooperation
PACE  Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly
PR  Public Relations
SAC  Second Action Committee
SDP  Social Democratic Party in the Federal Republic of Germany
UDHR  Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UK  United Kingdom
UN  United Nations
UNGA  UN General Assembly
US  United States
Archival collections and their abbreviations

ABA  Library and Archive of the Labour Movement
     (Arbejderbevægelsens Bibliotek og Arkiv, ABA),
     Copenhagen.
ACDP  Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik,
      Sankt Augustin.
BB  Bodil Begtrup’s private papers, DKNA.
BL  Bodleian Library, Oxford.
CAB  Records of the Cabinet Office, UKNA.
CARDOC  Archive and Documentation Centre
        of the European Parliament, Luxembourg.
DKFA  Archive of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DKNA.
DKNA  Denmark’s National Archive, Copenhagen.
DKUN  Archive of the Danish Mission to the UN, DKNA.
DWNC  Danish Women’s National Council, DKNA.
FO  Foreign Office, UKNA.
GdF  Geoffrey de Freitas Papers, BL.
HEJ  Nachlaß Hans-Edgar Jahn, ACDP.
HF  Hartvig Frisch papers, ABA.
HH  Hans Hedtoft papers, ABA.
JOK  Jens Otto Krag papers, ABA.
LAB  Ministry of Labour and National Service, UKNA.
MC  Ministry of Commerce, DKNA.
PREM  Records of the Prime Minister’s Office, UKNA.
SD  State Department, USNARA.
UKNA  United Kingdom National Archives, Kew, London.
USNARA  US National Archives and Record Administration,
        Washington D.C.
VN  Vincent Næser’s private papers, DKNA.