

**POSTMODERNIST APPROACH TO BIOGRAPHY:
THE LAST TESTAMENT OF OSCAR WILDE BY PETER ACKROYD**

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Abstract. *The article explores the postmodernist approach to biography through an analysis of the novel "The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde" (1983) by Peter Ackroyd. The theoretical framework the essay uses provides a synthesis of relevant ideas on the subject: it touches on Julia Kristeva, William Irwin and Linda Hutcheon's observations on intertextuality, as well as Fredric Jameson and Roger Fowler's views on pastiche and parody. It also draws slight parallels to other Ackroyd's works which use similar literary methods and techniques. The essay concludes by reinforcing the fact that, despite the postmodernist distortions and all its playful ventriloquism, the novel is perfectly capable of providing a genuine insight into the life of its subject, managing to bring this character from the past alive to the reader – which is, the essay asserts, the only aim of any significance of a true biography.*

Key words: *postmodernism, biography, Oscar Wilde, Peter Ackroyd*

I. POSTMODERN BIOGRAPHY: FLIRTING WITH TRADITION

*"Every great man nowadays has his disciples,
and it is usually Judas who writes the biography."
Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist* (1891)*

It is a long way biography has endured since the ancient Greeks developed the biographical tradition we have inherited: from the moralizing approach of the first biographers, through its religious role in the works of monks and priests in the Middle Ages, 'sociological' biographies in the modern age which treat their subject as the result of the environment and 'psychological' ones which emphasize personal development, all the way to the new school of biography featuring iconoclasts, scientific analysts and fictional biographers. The form of biography has also consistently changed parallel to its role and function within society, reflecting its status as a genre among other literary forms.

However, the modernist movement from the beginning of the 20th century seemed to discard biography in search of innovative forms, so it started losing its overwhelming influence on the novelists in pursuit of new aspects and values of reality. The biographical description of reality in the form of the coherent interpretation of a succession of events starting from a given beginning to a predictable end received a treatment of a second-rate preoccupation. Traditional patterns were markedly rejected, since tradition in itself was presumed to threaten the necessary freedom from resented constraints.

But biography as the starting point of a narrative has never been totally estranged from the novel and, starting with the postmodernist era, it seems to have given new inspiration to a number of major novelists. The attitude of postmodernist writers differs from that of their modernist predecessors, first because eclecticism now meets with approval by novelists and critics alike; secondly, because postmodernist writers tend to consider modernist principles in a new light, with a good deal of skepticism, and they give up confronting tradition - they do not mind flirting with it. Postmodern novelists feel free to oppose and parody whatever forms they have inherited from the past, playing with the very themes and structures that modernist authors were supposed to discard.

Bearing these poetics and distinctions in mind, the essay will attempt at identifying the elements which can be classified as shared by both postmodern literary theory and biography as an aged genre in the postmodern era, as illustrated by the novel which is the subject of the essay's analysis.

2. THE LAST TESTAMENT OF OSCAR WILDE

When one has weighed the sun in the balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens, there still remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?
Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1895)

As mentioned in the introduction, the postmodern novel, unlike modernist literature - which mainly rejects traditional patterns - is willing to reconsider the old literary forms. *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, written in the form of a fictional diary which Oscar Wilde was writing in Paris in 1900, largely follows this pattern: through a chronological structure and a realistic style which sustains the illusion of a linear retrospective view of the story, resembling the pre-modernist novel of the 19th century, the events weave together to tell the story of Wilde's life, his glory and failure through literary fame and later trial and jail.

However, despite the seeming parallelisms, the novel differs from the inherited tradition. It displays characteristics which, although slightly and occasionally present in the previous periods, most often as isolated phenomena, appear united and reinforced in the postmodern period, producing a synergy effect which transforms the narrative into a story with new, revealing perspectives.

2.1 Eclecticism of genres: the blur of boundaries

*"The world is changed because you are made of ivory and gold.
The curves of your lips rewrite history."*
Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

One of the features of postmodern literature is the marked eclecticism of genres. Charles Newman, in his book *The Post-Modern Aura*, defines postmodern art as a "commentary on the aesthetic history of whatever genre it adopts" (Newman, 1985: 44). In this vein, eclecticism is also present in *The Last Testament*, where it can be observed both at the level of converging elements of biography, autobiography and journal on the one hand, and fiction and non-fiction on the other.

2.1.1. *Biography, autobiography, journal*

"A man's face is his autobiography. A woman's face is her work of fiction."
Oscar Wilde, *Quoted in H. Montgomery Hyde, Oscar Wilde: A Biography* (1975)

Oscar Wilde never wrote a testament during the last months of his life in Paris: this book is a pretense autobiography, written in the first person as a self-portrait of the artist who contemplates on his career and later on the infamous trial and imprisonment. But under this formal disguise, the novel is largely a biography resembling Ackroyd's other biographies (those of Dickens and William Blake, for example), as it provides an account of both professional and personal development of the author, pointing to the connection between his life and work.

The fictional Wilde himself reflects on the subject: "[T]he first law of imagination...[is]...that in his work the artist is someone other than himself" (Ackroyd, 1993: 131). In that vein, Ackroyd has put himself in the position of the other artist, creating a work of art that blurs the distinction between a biography and an autobiography.

In addition to being on the borderline between biography and autobiography, the novel is also written in the form of a journal, kept on a daily basis, in almost regular intervals, following all the rules of narrative consistency and self-examining perspective a journal normally requires. Written in this traditional, undemanding form, it presents, in a succession of elaborately woven episodes, a deep and touching portrait of the life of one of Britain's most famous literary figures. It consists of reminiscences which blend atoning notes with confronting words of self-defense and resistance:

I was the greatest artist of my time, I do not doubt that, just as my tragedy was the greatest of its time. (...) I mastered each literary form. I brought comedy back to the English stage, I created symbolic drama in our tongue, and I invented the prose poem for a modern audience. I divorced criticism from practice, and turned into an independent enquiry, just as I wrote the only modern novel in English.

(Ackroyd, 1993: 170)

The Last Testament, in other words, bears marks of both autobiography and biography, as it is a first person narrative of someone else's life; and it also has a segmented chronology of a journal, creating a strong illusion of time and place. Through this eclecticism of genres, these converging threads tend toward achieving a common result: bringing the story from the past, with all its shades of glory and misery, as close as possible to the eye of the contemporary reader.

2.1.2. Fiction and non-fiction

*"The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."
Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)*

In addition to blending differing genres, Peter Ackroyd also blends fact and fiction in his work. Like in his other biographies, he integrates historical facts, providing a lot of biographical details with utmost accuracy, but he also attaches elements of fantasy, inventing details, mostly intimate ones, of Wilde's life. This is in line with Linda Hutcheon's assertion that, by merging fiction and history, historiographic metafiction "plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record" (Hutcheon, 1988: 114). Postmodern fiction thus suggests that "to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon, 1988: 110).

Ackroyd himself questions the veracity of the events, involving the characters in lengthy discussions on the trustworthiness of the novel:

'You cannot publish this [journal], Oscar. It is nonsense - and most of it is quite untrue.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'It is invented.'

'It is my life.'

'But you have quite obviously changed the facts to suit your purpose.'

'I have no purpose, and the facts came quite naturally to me.'

(Ackroyd, 1993: 160)

He also masks the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, fact and fantasy, by assigning some of the non-truths to Wilde's own corrupt nature or misjudgment, questioning his role as a narrator:

'And what do you think?'

'It's full of lies, but of course you are. It is absurd and mean and foolish. But then you are. Of course you must publish it.'

(Ackroyd, 1993: 161)

This subversion of established conventions has parallels with poststructuralism and Derrida's deconstruction theory which questions established truths and hierarchies.

Ackroyd himself has expressed a belief that there is not much difference between writing fiction and biography: "I don't think there's any distinction between the two activities [invention and mimesis]. On the whole they tend to become the same thing. You can't have invention in a vacuum; it always has to spring from, or in large part depend upon, the way other people use the language. So invention is a form of mimesis. On the other hand, the idea of transcribing or copying the external world in itself is a form of invention" (McGrath, 1989: 30). Thus Ackroyd confirms in his writing the postmodern literary view of history, which asserts that as soon as an event is written down, it is turned into a sort of fiction; after all, we are trapped in what literary critic Fredric Jameson calls the "prison-house of language" (Jameson, 1972: 14), which renders us only detached observers of reality.

The Last Testament is, therefore, neither fictional nor non-fictional, as it combines fantasy with reality. This postmodern play with blurring boundaries helps again to create the illusion of intimacy and authenticity.

2.2. Intertextuality

*"Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions,
their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation."
Oscar Wilde, De Profundis (1895)*

Postmodern literature is also characterized by marked intertextuality as a narrative mode. According to the poststructuralist Julia Kristeva, who coined the term 'intertextuality', the meanings of a text are not conveyed directly to the reader, but through the 'codes' imposed by other texts (Kristeva, 1980: 69), in this case Wilde's original works.

In his extensive biography of Dickens, Ackroyd - in a brief, postmodern mini-play, through the voices of Wilde, Dickens and other writers - expounds his own justifying view of intertextuality:

Chatterton: The truest poetry is not the most feigning. It is that which is most borrowed, passed down from poet to poet.
 Eliot: I originally entitled *The Waste Land* "He Do The Police In Different Voices". I took that line from *Our Mutual Friend*.
 Wilde: You did not take it. You rescued it.
 Dickens: I was perpetually being accused of stealing work from other novelists, but I did so without realising it at the time.
 Wilde: That is the definition of inspiration.
 (...)
 Dickens: ...All writing is a form of revelation, by which we can move into the shadowy world and borrow from there all the emblems and images which comprehend our state.

(Ackroyd, 1990: 427, 430)

Intertextuality renders a text a fragment of a vast mosaic of texts. It is in accordance with Ackroyd's assertion, in his *Notes for a New Culture* (1976), that texts are always transformations, be they covert or overt, of other texts. "Other people's writings often spark something off in me", Ackroyd reveals (McGrath, 1989: 32). In this vein, *The Last Testament* contains numerous references to other literary sources; it is a collage absorbing a vast material of inherited and borrowed information, yet retaining its individual status and autonomy. These manifestations of intertextuality in the novel include elements of parody and pastiche, which are not exclusively postmodern techniques, but, being present in postmodernism to such a large extent, represent some of its most prominent characteristics.

2.2.1. Parody

*"We are the zanies of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken."
Oscar Wilde, De Profundis (1895)*

Unlike 'pre-postmodern' parody, which uses characters belonging to one work in another work in a similar context, providing a humorous effect only by the change of the

setting, postmodern writers use their characters out of context to provide a metaphoric meaning. This postmodern treatment of parody is present in Ackroyd's biography of Dickens with Ackroyd chatting to Dickens in contemporary settings such as the London Underground, out of the context where we would otherwise expect to find this Victorian author.

Parody contains the humorous element which distinguishes it from other imitative forms. It may have an ambivalent status of both affirming and degrading the object of its ridicule. It is analytic, subversive mimicry, which is often "deflationary and comic" (Fowler & Childs, 2006: 167). Ackroyd's fictional Wilde comments himself on parody: "But I believed then that almost all the methods and conventions of art found their highest expression in parody" (Ackroyd, 1993: 50).

It is difficult to define the precise extent to which *The Last Testament* uses this literary technique. There are a lot of satiric and ironic elements in the novel, but they are not easy to separate from Wilde's one witticisms that are often parodic themselves: "It is remarkable how interesting life becomes when one has ceased to be a part of it" (Ibid.: 7). The frequent use of word puns is another humorous feature imitative of Wilde's prose that Ackroyd has managed to recreate in his novel:

'Please, Bosie, do not violate our friendship with words of scorn.'
'Our friendship, as you call it, was violet from the beginning.'

(Ibid.: 8)

Wilde is portrayed within this setting of parodic elements, but the novel is not disrespectful or deflationary, as Fowler suggests parodic writing can often be: it is rather the opposite, very much appreciative of its subject. Ackroyd might have created a work of art that is about other literature almost to the point of parody, but it is still prevailingly tragic, with parody used only as a tool for creating an allusion of authenticity.

2.2.2. Pastiche

"While one should always study the method of a great artist, one should never imitate his manner. The manner of an artist is essentially individual, the method of an artist is absolutely universal."
Oscar Wilde, *Dramatic Review* (1886)

Contrary to Wilde's advice expressed in the quotation, pastiche, or the imitation of another writer's style, is another intertextual feature shared by the novel. Pastiche is prominent in postmodern literature. Many postmodern genre writings are predominantly pastiches. Fredric Jameson describes pastiche as "the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language", but, unlike parody, "it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter (...). Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (Jameson, 1991: 16).

In the interview with Patrick McGrath, Ackroyd affirms that the only time that other authors really influenced his writing was when he wrote the book about Oscar Wilde: "[T]hat was the only time I attached myself to someone else's style" (McGrath, 1989: 33).

Last Testament is a work of pastiche, for the most part – an undisguised imitation of Wilde's unique literary style, his vocabulary and grammar, his tone and mannerism and the inescapable atmosphere of Wilde's prose. Ackroyd adopts all stylistic signposts easily recognized in Wilde's works, such as his witty remarks and aphorisms, subversion of 'common truths' and paradoxes: "There is one principle you must understand (...): an art-

ist's life is determined by what he forgets, not by what he remembers" (Ackroyd, 1993: 69). He imitates Wilde's ingenious comparisons and metaphors: "[I]ndeed I have always attempted to express in my own tongue the languor and the eroticism of the French writers. Their sentences are like flowers pressed tightly together: no light can pass them which is not dazed by color and infected by scent" (Ibid.: 62). By imitating the varied tone of Wilde's prose, the book also includes the mimicry of the sadness and seriousness contained in his writing, the bitterness of his disillusionment and the despair of his grief: "I had appealed to the world to save my reputation, and it crushed me" (Ibid.: 138). There are even several stories echoing Wilde's own fairy tales, written entirely in Wilde's manner and style.

Furthermore, there is another aspect of the employment of pastiche in this novel, and this is the presence of the elements of decadence, a movement often associated with Wilde's literary opus and lifestyle. The examples of decadent features include Wilde's apotheosis of art: "[T]he only matters of any importance were Art and the things of Art" (Ibid.: 65), his approval of immorality: "I made a philosophy out of insincerity" (Ibid.: 89), and his loathing of the modern world blended with his contempt for popular opinion: "Of course I knew that my plays were potboilers - exquisite potboilers - and I disowned each one as soon as it was successful: if one had failed, I would have hugged it to myself and proclaimed it the true voice of my art" (Ibid.: 88).

As can be seen from the examples, Ackroyd has managed to turn his scholarly research, combined with his vivid imagination and stylistic imitation, into a complex, convincing illusion he has retained complete throughout the novel. Through constructing Wilde's voice, he has assisted the readers in their identifying with Wilde's personality and trying to reach the mystery of his life.

3. CONCLUSION

*"Like two doomed ships that pass in storm
We had crossed each other's way:
But we made no sign, we said no word,
We had no word to say;"*

Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898)

When *The Last Testament* was published in 1983, critics were much concerned with Ackroyd's biographical innovations, considered in this essay. But all of them were mainly the natural influence of the widespread postmodern literary milieu which, at the time of the novel's creation, had already been shaping the other genres. Ackroyd was just the one who was ingenious enough to model biography, the ancient and, needless to say, one of the most rigid literary genres, using the evasive postmodern mold, providing his readers with both an informative piece of writing and a novel with a life of its own, a work of aestheticism, imagination and brilliant thought.

Ackroyd has thus succeeded in creating a work loyal to the postmodernist tradition that has breasted it out, but also an authentic literary mirror reflecting another time and another author. If there is a significant difference between the postmodernist and the traditional approach to biography, it is certainly to the advantage of the postmodernist approach. These literary techniques and methods new or intensified in postmodern biography only help us to better identify with its subject: through its new liberties in the

use of genres, imitation of the subject's own works and even parodying some of their aspects, we can only obtain an improved insight into the subject's life.

So, if the aim of the biography were, to paraphrase Wilde's words from the beginning of the novel, that the fatefulness of the subject's life should touch anyone foolish enough to write their biography (Ackroyd, 1993: 15), including the reader, then it is entirely fulfilled in this novel. If there is a time span between the souls of the two authors, there is certainly, also, this arch of art, bridging the present and the past, creating an amazing aesthetic bond, the literary 'Arch of Triumph' connecting the beautiful minds. Ackroyd's postmodern prose breathes new life into the biography of the Irish writer, deepening it with new revealing shades of insight and understanding.

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POSTMODERNISTIČKI PRISTUP BIOGRAFIJI: POSLEDNJI TESTAMENT OSKARA VAJLDA PITERA AKROJDA

Mirjana M. Knežević

Rad istražuje postmodernistički pristup biografiji kroz analizu romana "Poslednji testament Oskara Vajlda" (1983) Pitera Akrojda. Teoretski okvir koji esej koristi nudi sintezu relevantnih ideja o tom predmetu: opservacije Julije Kristeve, Vilijama Irvina i Linde Hačion o intertekstualnosti, kao i stavove Fredrika Džejmsona i Rodžera Faulera o pastišu i parodiji. Esaj takodje povlači paralele sa drugim Akrojdovim radovima koji koriste slične književne metode i tehnike. U zaključku se ističe činjenica da, uprkos postmodernističkim distorcijama i razigranom ventrilokvizmu, roman savršeno uspeva da pruži pravi uvid u život svog subjekta, uspevajući da oživi čitaocu lik iz prošlosti – što je, tvrdi se u eseju, jedini važan cilj istinske biografije.

Ključne reči: *postmodernizam, biografija, Oskar Vajld, Piter Akrojd*