

Biographical Fictions and the Writing of the World

Abstract

This essay reflects on questions that arise when we consider fictional representations of historical lives (biofiction) as world literature. In what ways does writing about an individual life concern the world? How do the modes of biographical and autobiographical fiction explore or challenge the grounds and boundaries of nation, place, culture, language, tradition, lineage that constrain or sustain identities? How do they negotiate the continuities and fractures – psychological and emotional as much as historical and ideological – between person, home and world? How do they inform our thinking about “world literature” as literature aware of its responsibility in the world and to the world that it receives, describes, shapes, creates, passes on as legacy?

I first consider Steven Price’s novel *Lampedusa*, which narrates the last two years of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s life as he was writing *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), a novel centred, in turn, on the real-life figure of Tomasi’s great-grandfather at the time of the unification of Italy. Anna Banti’s *Noi credevamo* (“We believed”), narrated in the first person of Banti’s grandfather, further helps examine how the biofictional form is used to critique the concept of the nation from its periphery and to investigate the relationship between place, nation and world. John Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus*, revolving on the astronomer who theorized heliocentrism, enquires into our historical, scientific, philosophical and literary constructions of the world as physical planet, as place in which we live, and as the object of our representations. Finally, *Dar* (*The Gift*), the last novel written in Russian by Vladimir Nabokov, through the failures of its protagonist’s biographical and biofictional experiments, raises the question for the émigré writer of how to rebuild a relationship with the world.

Keywords

Biofiction
World literature
Steven Price
Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa
Anna Banti
John Banville
Vladimir Nabokov

If it is possible to have more keywords, I’d like to add the titles of the novels too after the names of the authors:

Steven Price, *Lampedusa*
Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il gattopardo*
Anna Banti, *Noi credevamo*
John Banville, *Doctor Copernicus*
Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*

Biographical Fictions and the Writing of the World¹

Literature has long been populated with characters drawn from real life (Goldschmidt traces the phenomenon to Roman times), but novels centred entirely on historical figures have increased exponentially over the last decades. Labels for what is now identified as a separate genre have also proliferated, and “biofiction” (originally used by Buisine in 1990) has gained currency, not least through the extensive work of Michael Lackey. While the doubts raised over the legitimacy of these fictions appear to have been laid to rest, discussions remain open on various other aspects, including the politics of the choice of a particular subject, the ethics of appropriating another’s story or even voice, the relevance of adhering to documentary evidence, generic boundaries and the relationship with historical fiction. In his critique of Lukács’ condemnation of the biographical novel in *The Historical Novel*, Lackey argues that Lukács’ error lies in failing to see the biographical novel as a separate genre from the historical, thus to be judged by different criteria; if for Lukács the historical novel shows how a human life and consciousness is shaped and conditioned by the political, social and economic forces of a particular historical juncture, the focus of biofiction must be seen, Lackey argues, as quite the opposite: human agency and the possibilities of human consciousness, freed from the need to adhere to historical fact (see Lackey *Biographical Fiction* 1, 6-8; *Conversations* 2-4; *Biofiction* 79-81). I certainly concur with the assumption that the “fiction” of “bio-fiction” confers freedom from “bio” and that the coherence of the biographical novel should lie in the coherence of the novel, not the accuracy of its adherence to biography. Yet I also argue that the recognition of historicity (rather than closeness to the historical record) matters, even when facts are departed from, and that this recognition is part of the aesthetic and ethical programme of the genre. Rather than as radical alternative to the historical novel, I see the spectrum of biofiction as ranging from instances that come closer to historical fiction in their concern with the reconstruction of a particular time and individual life, all the way to explicitly counterfactual fictions (on this, see Gallagher), via texts that may remain more or less close to the documents but whose main

¹ I am sincerely grateful to the Arts and Humanities Institute of Maynooth University for the Visiting Fellowship that generously provided me with the space and time to complete this article.

concern is to focus imaginatively on what history or biography have no access to, such as an individual's innermost thoughts.

In earlier work I have been especially interested in what I have called “heterobiographies,” novels written in the grammatical first person of a historical personage – though of course written by another – and which pay explicit attention to the gaps created by the staging of a “double I” (writer and narrator, narrator and narrated subject, historical and fictional I), enabling the inquiry into changing conceptions of selfhood and of the relationships between writing, history and subjectivity (Boldrini *Autobiographies of Others*). In this article I start exploring questions that arise when we consider fictional representations of historical lives as world literature. In what ways does writing about an individual life concern the world? Beyond the figures of migrants, exiles, explorers, travellers that populate many biofictional novels, how do the modes of biographical and autobiographical fiction explore or challenge the grounds and boundaries of nation, place, culture, language, tradition, lineage that constrain or sustain identities? How do they negotiate the continuities and fractures – psychological and emotional as much as historical and ideological – between person, home and world? How do they inform our thinking about “world literature” as literature aware of its responsibility in the world and to the world that it receives, describes, shapes, creates, passes on as legacy?

In the pages that follow I will consider some textual examples chosen for the diversity of their concerns. Focused on the Italian writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Steven Price's elegiac novel *Lampedusa* (2019) explores the relationship between place, region, nation and world and describes the creation of *Il gattopardo* (1958), itself a biofiction of Tomasi's great-grandfather. Anna Banti's *Noi credevamo* (“We believed,” 1967), presented as if narrated in the first person by Banti's grandfather, will also be discussed in order to further the analysis of how the biofictional form is used, in these examples, to critique the concept of the nation from its internal neglected periphery. I will then turn, more briefly, to John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), which revolves around the early modern astronomer who theorized the heliocentric universe. Through his life, the novel enquires into our historical, scientific, philosophical and literary constructions of the world as physical planet, as place in which we live, and as the object of our representations. Finally, I will consider, also briefly, *The Gift*, the last novel written in Russian by Vladimir Nabokov, a *Kunstlerroman* which explores, through the failures of its protagonist's biographical and biofictional experiments, the effects of displacement from one's country and culture, and raises the question for the émigré writer of how to rebuild a relationship of the self with the

world. Before turning to the novels, however, I need to pause for a moment on world literature.

“Which world? Whose world?”

Since Goethe reportedly said, in 1827, that “National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and every one must strive to hasten its approach” (Goethe *Conversations*, 31 January 1827, 165-66), the field of world literature has traditionally been defined in opposition to national literature. His description of the relationships between literatures in terms of markets and wares (Goethe *Correspondence*, letter to Thomas Carlyle of 20 July 1827, 25-26), famously echoed in Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* (39), further relates literary production to international economic exchange. This transcending of the nation can thus be studied systematically (as do, for example, in different ways, Casanova, Moretti and the Warwick Research Collective, all of whom tend to associate world literature with modernity, and in particular with capitalist modernity); or in terms of circulation beyond a work’s linguistic or national original location, often (but not necessarily) in translation, the work’s reception in a different time or place expanding its meaning, significance and value (e.g. Damrosch). These approaches have prompted disquiet, especially about the loss of the specific singularity of the literary texts (e.g. Apter) or the western-centric systematisation of literature that claims mastery over the entire world and erases the specific linguistic, cultural and historical terrain from which the work emerges (e.g. Spivak). These perspectives and debates are part of the background of my reflections. The approach that most animates them, however, is Edward Said’s sense of world literature as a way of reading for the manners in which texts engage with the actual, tangible conditions of being in the world. Said’s reliance on Auerbach’s concept of the *Ansatzpunkt* – the point of departure, of entry into an otherwise overwhelmingly large field and from which interpretations and connections then irradiate (Auerbach 13-14) – appears apposite for choosing an individual life as a point from which to think of the world. The awareness that a different entry point (in our case, a different life) would have led to a different organization of the material, therefore a different perspective on the world, is a salutary reminder of the partiality of all our interpretations, of the risks involved in the desire to systematise all-encompassingly. This cautionary warning can also be seen to be at work in biofiction’s focus on an individual life to provide a perspective on the world, a perspective that remains conscious both of the self’s singularity and of its participation in collective subjects and concepts, including region, nation and world. The discussion that follows, in other words, is

informed by a sense of world literature driven both by the awareness of large-scale historical contexts and relationships of power and by the attention to the human scale of the circumstances of individual lives in the world.

This leads to the questions, what do we mean by “world,” whose world do we mean when we talk of world literature? Inquiries such as Cheah’s and Ganguly’s address these questions. An author not usually associated with theories of world literature but whose work asks, precisely, “Which world? Whose world?” is Nadine Gordimer, in her 1997 essay “The Status of the Writer in the World Today.” Gordimer recalls that Edward Said had taken her to task for her assertion that the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz was not given his due recognition as an author of world literature. Said’s response had been to ask what world did she define Mahfouz by, and what world did her assessment confine *her* to: because Mahfouz *is* an author of world literature when seen from the Arab World. Said, Gordimer writes, “had hit intriguingly upon a paradox. *He* was placing the concept of another ‘world literature’ alongside the one that I had posited with my eyes fixed on Euro-North America as the literary navel-of-the-world. In the all-encompassing sense of the term ‘world,’ can any of our literatures be claimed definitively as ‘world’ literature? Which world? Whose world?” (521). This, Gordimer explains, led her to reconsider world literature from the perspective of Africa and the Global South. Concerns such as global migration and the focus on the disenfranchised in and beyond South Africa appear more explicitly in her post-apartheid work, such as in the novel *The Pickup* where, I have argued elsewhere (“Constructing Character”), Gordimer’s questions about the world centre on the construction of character, on the encounter between the real / historical and the imagined: not only in the sense of how the writer grounds her imagination in the historical world that she knows, but also, crucially, of how all our encounters with others, in the world, always involve an imagination – a fictionalisation – of the other: we create biofictions of others as we relate to them in the world. This bears relevance on why biofiction, centred on individuals as characters and as people and on the tension it foregrounds between the imaginary and the historical world, is relevant to thinking about world literature as literature that addresses the ethical, political, economic, historical relationships between person, home and world; that recognizes its own ability, even its responsibility, to shape the world; that reveals how the means and manner of representation affect our understanding of our place in the world and its communities.

Before I leave the topic of world literature, I would like to mention two other perspectives that are relevant to these reflections. Djelal Kadir has expanded the concept of world literature beyond its usual starting point of Goethe’s use of the expression, relating it to

the ancient Greek notion of *oikouménē*.² Kadir goes as far back as “the fifth century B.C. when Herodotus’ perception of a shifting *oikoumene*, or world as home, led him to compose the inquiring narratives that would form the founding acts of historiography and of the narrative genre of history.” The *oikoumene*, Kadir explains, “would undergo a transcultural metamorphosis in ontological, political, and epistemic ways. The *oikoumene* would no longer be the ‘home as the world.’ It would thenceforth mean the challenging process and vicissitudes of ‘feeling at home in the world.’” “The larger question,” Kadir asks, “is what happens to the locus of the *oikoumene* when it ceases to be tantamount to *the* world and becomes yet another locus *in* the world?” (Kadir 3-4).

Finally, I want to recall Eric Hayot’s important point that we should think of world literature not just as related to modern global capitalist systems but in the context of “larger cultural formations,” both historically and cosmologically. The latter term should be taken not in the modern sense that restricts cosmology to a branch of astronomy, but in the much longer span of Western history, up to the eighteenth century, when cosmology is conceived of as a “world-imagining force” that, “under the earlier name of cosmography [...] addressed not only questions of physics and physical creation but of geography, translation, politics, and history” (Hayot 229).

Steven Price, *Lampedusa*

Lampedusa, by the Canadian novelist Steven Price, records the last two years (1955-57) of the life of the Sicilian writer Giuseppe Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa, Duke of Palma. These are the years of the post-war economic boom and the early years of the Italian Republic, after the referendum that brought about the abolition of the monarchy in 1946 and the introduction of the new Constitution in 1948.

At the start of the novel, Lampedusa is diagnosed with emphysema – it will evolve into lung cancer – and muses on death, destruction, and the historical passing of the world that he had known. The words spoken in the novel by the Sicilian poet Lucio Piccolo, Tomasi’s real-life cousin – “We are from a world that no longer exists. If we do not write that world, write it down, then what will become of it?” (Price 31) – attribute to literature an

² From *oikos*, which designates home, family, but also the possessions of the household. Though normally abbreviated to just *oikouménē*, the full expression would be *oikouménē gē* “inhabited earth.”

archival role of preserving worlds made obsolete by history. But Price's evocative novel does a lot more than seek to preserve a lost world; it also narrates the development of the novel for which Tomasi di Lampedusa is best known, *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*). Rejected by publishers while the author was still living, it was published posthumously in 1958 and became a major success, in Italy first, then internationally, not least thanks to Luchino Visconti's 1963 film adaptation starring an international cast with Burt Lancaster, Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale.

The protagonist of *Il gattopardo* is the historical figure of Lampedusa's great-grandfather, Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina. *Lampedusa* can thus be seen as a biofiction about the writing of a biofiction. Lampedusa "had thought to write a novel in the manner of Joyce, a single twenty-four-hour account of his astronomer great-grandfather during the landings of Garibaldi's soldiers in May of 1860" (Price 41) – that is, a European modernist novel set at the time leading to the unification of Italy, when Garibaldi's mission led to the overthrow of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and its annexation, through a referendum, to the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont. Alongside the decline of what was still a feudal system, *Il gattopardo* also dramatizes why unification, proclaimed in 1861 and hailed in Italian national mythography as progress towards modernity and democracy, led to the so-called "problem of the South," a South seen as atavistic, immobile, incapable of progress – incapable of belonging to history – but whose lack of progress the novel shows to be linked, from the start, to a political failure and the betrayal of its people. *Il gattopardo* narrates, for example, how the plebiscite that annexed the South to the Kingdom of Italy returned a unanimous vote even though we know that some people voted against ("Voters, 515; Voting, 512; Yes, 512, No, zero." Tomasi *The Leopard* 82). Don Fabrizio reflects that the result, which would have been overwhelmingly favourable to unification even without the falsification of the ballots of those who had voted against, was not so much the birth of the new state as, rather, the strangling of the baby, of the good faith of the people whose freedom is erased just as it is offered for the first time:

now he knew who had been killed [strangled] at Donnafugata, at a hundred other places [...]: a new-born babe: good faith; [...] Don Fabrizio could not know it then, but a great deal of the slackness and acquiescence for which the people of the South were to be

criticized during the next decade, was due to the stupid annullment of the first expression of liberty ever offered them. (Tomasi *The Leopard* 84-86)³

In Price's novel, set in the aftermath of the Second World War and of another referendum that made Italy a Republic and was hailed a further step towards modernisation and democratisation, Lampedusa sees another betrayal of the country's southern periphery:

Of course the new age ushered in by the American liberators, the age of the economic miracle, of the industrial north, was no less corroded, cruel, or wasteful than the vanishing feudal age of his novel. Was it possible [...] that his novel was not really about the past at all? (Price 232)

If the plebiscite for the unification had been falsified, the overcoming of fascism by the new Republic is also a travesty. The student Francesco Orlando says, "The Fascists are still in power. They still hold positions of authority. You think just because we are a republic that anything has changed?" (Price 49). Orlando's words echo those of Don Fabrizio's nephew Tancredi in *Il gattopardo*, probably the most famous in the novel: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" (Tomasi *The Leopard* 19).⁴

³ "Iscritti 515; votanti 512; 'sì' 512; 'no' zero. Don Fabrizio [...] adesso sapeva chi era stato strangolato a Donnafugata, in cento altri luoghi [...]: una neonata, la buonafede; [...] Don Fabrizio non poteva saperlo allora, ma una parte della neghittosità, dell'acquiescenza per la quale durante i decenni seguenti si doveva vituperare la gente del Mezzogiorno, ebbe la propria origine nello stupido annullamento della prima espressione di libertà che a questo popolo si era mai presentata" (Tomasi *Il gattopardo* 121-125).

⁴ "Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi." (Tomasi *Il gattopardo* 50). There is no space to expand on this, but Francesco Orlando, described as a studious youth "with professorial ambitions" (Price 21), became the first professor to hold a chair in Literary Theory in Italy, and was one of my teachers at the University of Pisa in the late 1980s. Reading his name in Price's novel had for me an effect similar to what Roland Barthes calls the *punctum* of photography, something that pierces, that has an affective and not just intellectual force. This effect is, for me, intrinsically related to the value of the historicity of the person as character in biofiction and thus to the aesthetic programme of the genre.

In the second chapter, set in September 1955, Lampedusa's visit to the ruins of his estate at Palma di Montechiaro is intertwined with his recollection of another trip, to San Pellegrino Terme in the North of Italy, where his cousin Lucio received a literary award from Eugenio Montale. The chapter thus sets up a contrast between the immobility of the provincial south, where everything has already happened ("there is no date in Agrigento, there is no year in Palma di Montechiaro. [...] It is a world that has already passed elsewhere," Price 73), and a North turned towards success, imbued with a sense of superiority. This contrast of North and South, of progress and immobility, recalls the theorizations of Europe that also haunt the birth of comparative literature, such as those of Mme de Staël and Montesquieu, in which the North is historical, driven by progress, by the spirit of freedom, by laws and by states that are the expression of their peoples and morals; while the South has no history because it has no progress, it is primitive, atavistic, ruled by nature, the senses, and despotism (on this see Dainotto). This is a diagnosis that the novel appears to confirm. When, in the conversation above, Orlando laments how workers have to move north to look for work, "leaving the land all over. [...] Sicily is emptying. The south is dying," Tomasi replies, "The south has been dying for centuries. [...] In my grandfather's day, the people were leaving the villages for Palermo and Messina. In my father's day, they were leaving for America. Now they leave for the north. How is it different?" The bitter conclusion is that "Sicily cannot keep up. [...] Sicily never changes, not really" (47-48). Yet Lampedusa's dislike of his city of Palermo and his scorn for Sicily is accompanied by a deep nostalgic attachment, and the text offers a more complex perspective on the relationship of Sicily and the South to the North and the Italian national project, to Europe and the world than this account may suggest.

The novel starts with Tomasi contemplating a piece of rock from the island of Lampedusa that he keeps on his desk. He's never visited Lampedusa – none of the Princes that bore the title did. "It is an island of fire, at the edge of the world; who could live there?" He thinks, "This is a dead thing and yet it will outlive me. He was the last of his line and after him came only extinction." He recalls, "As a boy he had listened to his governess tell him the dust of Sicily came from the Sahara and this he had repeated all his life though he did not know if it was true. He imagined it blown across the sea in shimmering red curtains of heat, the hot winds of the sirocco billowing it north, raking the island of Lampedusa in its path" (Price 3). And then, he reflects:

He had loved England, loved Paris, had loved in a doomed way his suffering in the Austrian prisoner camps during the first war, had journeyed by railway and coach north to Latvia loving the vast dark northern forests that scrolled past. Yet he returned always here, to an unloved city [...] Now, already old, [...] living in a decrepit palazzo at the edge of the sea [...]. If asked he would admit it was his house, but not his home. His true home stood behind thick walls several streets away, in a slump of cracked stone and wind-rotted masonry from a bomb borne across the Atlantic, a bomb whose sole purpose was the obliteration of the world as it had been. That bomb fell in April 1943 and his wife's estate at Stomersee far to the north in Latvia had been overrun by the Russians in the same month. (Price 4-5)

Thus, the novel weaves from the start a tight web of connections between place, self and world. The dust blown (perhaps) from the Sahara connects Sicily to Africa; the rock from Lampedusa puts the death and life of the individual and his lineage in the context of the larger, deeper time of the rocks, the natural environment, geological time. The island of Lampedusa is almost a mirage, the object of fantastical stories – later we hear about the monster that, according to the Arab geographer Ibn al'Assad, in the tenth century, inhabits a cave on its shore and stirs when boats set anchor (Price 72). The novel locates its historical protagonist and his story between the physical-geographic and the mythical, connecting geology, geography, personal place and personal story, both mooring and unmooring the self. The destruction of the palace in Via di Lampedusa under American bombs has ripped the anchor that grounded him to a precise affective and physical place (“He had loved this house as he had loved nothing else in his life. [...] Only here did he sense how belonging and time and space were one [...]” 288) and enabled him to travel to and love the cities of Europe and the forests of the north; those connections are now connections of trauma and death.

Tomasi di Lampedusa is the representative of a world that is culturally attuned to Europe, whose writers he loves, to whose cities he travels, and many of whose languages he speaks; geographically linked to Africa; politically affiliated, reluctantly, to an Italian republic that economically looks to Europe and America but dismisses his island as backward and a-historical. His ideal cosmopolitanism acts on the one hand as critique of the national and nationalist ideal (a critique expressed, not least, through his writing of *Il gattopardo*), complementing the ways in which the geographical and the geological signal a different set of belongings from those of the nation. On the other hand, his cosmopolitanism remains a cultural, not a political one. It is a cosmopolitanism conferred by his aristocracy, the product

of an internationally interconnected nobility destined to be exhausted and replaced by the globalism of the new economic boom of industry and finance.

The novel's perceptible sense of nostalgia for the dying world of the *ancien régime* is justified by the biofictional narrative focus on the historical figure of the prince, but, as I have suggested, the novel also retains the consciousness of the betrayal and disenfranchisement of all the citizens of Sicily and the South. A character such as that of Francesco Orlando is relevant to this consciousness: a socialist (though, in the novel, somewhat reluctantly), from the Sicilian bourgeoisie, he both loves and admires the cosmopolitan intellectual that is Tomasi di Lampedusa and expresses anger and despair at the impoverishment of the island and its labourers.⁵ It is useful therefore to turn to another fictionalised (auto)biography of a historical individual, also questioning the Italian national project from the perspective of the Italian South, this time the region of Calabria, and more explicitly concerned with the fate of the disenfranchised.

Anna Banti, *Noi credevamo*

Anna Banti's *Noi credevamo* (1967; literally, "We believed"), based on the life of Banti's grandfather Domenico Lopresti and narrated in his first-person voice, as he is dying, in 1883, presents his story as one of the disillusioned and now forgotten "heroes" of the Italian Risorgimento.⁶ Echoes of *Il gattopardo* pervade the novel, but while the latter was written from the perspective of the prince who sees the feudal system collapse and must adapt to retain power and privilege, *Noi credevamo* gives us the perspective of the nationalist who had sided with Garibaldi and fought for unification and liberation from foreign empires, but finds that the victory of the Piedmontese and the annexation of the South to the Kingdom of Italy is a betrayal both of the South and of the radical republican ideals of the Risorgimento. We read how Lopresti had long been jailed as a political prisoner, had risked execution, had

⁵ Orlando's memoirs of Lampedusa record the admiration and affection that he felt for the prince – and which was reciprocated – but also the tensions and misunderstandings arising from the distance of their worlds, especially once Lampedusa had started writing his novel (Orlando 51-53).

⁶ Anna Banti (pen name of Lucia Lopresti) is better known for her *Artemisia* (1947), one of the most explicit and thoughtful inquiries into the biofictional genre and what I have called the heterobiographical form (Boldrini *Autobiographies*, see esp. chapter 5).

been freed or had freed himself in heroic and rather melodramatic circumstances, and how he ended up accepting, more prosaically and to his shame, a bureaucratic job in the new kingdom of Italy, in its capital of Turin, in order to support his family.

The narrator is a reluctant autobiographer: he feels not the nostalgia of the world that is fading and needs to be preserved, as in *Lampedusa*, but shame in writing, because he could not bring into existence the more just world that he had desired, but also because of his feeling that the writing of one's memoirs is not legitimate, as if there were something unsavoury, almost unethical in the public telling of one's life. The focus on the self undermines the necessary focus on the collective, on the people that the self should have served but failed to emancipate: the autobiographical is, as it were, a betrayal of the world.

Lopresti knows that not all the peasants and the poor in the south had supported Garibaldi or unification. He rails against their prejudices, the fear of democracy rooted in their ignorance – their apathy disgusts him, but he recognizes that they remain disenfranchised in the new Italy which, having replaced the paternalism of the feudal system, now even expects taxes from them; that the imposition of a certain idea of political progress is a violence in itself. For Lopresti, writing his memoirs is a trap: one must but cannot be entirely sincere; writing requires admitting that he survived prison, but being saved means having betrayed the ideals for which he'd been imprisoned. With its questions about the legitimacy of writing autobiographically and historically, the novel also asks who has the right to do so and who can speak for the dispossessed.⁷ He has strived for coherence his entire life, but how can the individual give a coherent account of his and others' lives, of nation, region, and world, doing justice to all of them, when s/he has no right to do so and the nation state resolves into an alternative oppressor? As we saw earlier with *Lampedusa*, the alternative to the nation can't be the cosmopolitanism of a privileged sclerotic world, nor can it be the localism of an exhausted and hollowed out region.

The heroic gestures of an episode in which Lopresti sensationally escaped from capture feel to him like a novel, and he despises novels as fantasies; his role as novelistic hero ends, miserably, as that of a messy bureaucrat – and he can't even skip the pages, as it is

⁷ In "Biofiction, Heterobiography and the Ethics of Speaking of, for and as Another," among other works I discuss Gavin McCrea's *Mrs Engels*, which dramatizes, in relation to biofiction, the dilemmas and ethical implications of the Marxian trope about the need to represent those who cannot represent themselves.

the narrative of his own life.⁸ The events for which he is famous appear to him as a story about someone else, told by an other whose voice and first person – his own – he does not recognise but which – because it is his own – he cannot contradict.⁹ Having queried the autobiographical, Lopresti thus also queries the (bio)fictional. The split in his identity is the sign of the trauma of history, and it is this trauma that leads to his rejection both of memoir and of novel writing: of the factual and the fictional narrative of the role of the individual in history. He plans to destroy the pages he has written, yet he can't help writing. Finally, on the point of death, he finds in writing a reconciliation between individual and collective experience; not just the experience of prison in which he has so far found his identity, but in the struggle that followed it, to make that experience continue to matter. “But I do not matter: we were many, we were together, prison was not enough; our struggle would start once we got out. We, sweet word. We believed....”¹⁰

Here the novel ends as, we suppose, he dies. It is possible to see the final “we” as problematic. The Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero highlights the danger of speaking for the “we” as this would erase the “uniqueness and distinction” both of the self and of the other; postcolonial criticism critiques the “we” that homogenizes and that, associating with the coloniser’s perspective, claims mastery over the world.¹¹ Not all uses of the collective plural pronoun “we,” however, need to be homogenizing and imperialist. The transcendence of the “we,” problematic as it may be, is also required by the awareness that the world goes on before and after us. We are, as it were, tenants in the world, the *oikos* and *oikouménē gē*

⁸ “Romanzo, romanzo. Ed ecco, l’eroe finiva miseramente, da burocrate pasticcione. Né si poteva voltar pagina” (Banti 418).

⁹ “Costui parla in prima persona e, purtroppo, io non posso contraddirlo” (Banti 255).

¹⁰ “Ma io non conto, eravamo tanti, eravamo insieme, il carcere non bastava; la lotta dovevamo cominciarla quando ne uscimmo. Noi, dolce parola. Noi credevamo...” (Banti 513; my translation).

¹¹ Cavarero writes, “no matter how much you are similar and consonant, says this ethic, your story is never my story. No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognize myself in you and, even less, in the collective we” (92); Vilashini Cooppan attempts to disrupt the “fictive ‘we’” of the critical community in the field of World Literature (195). In “Rock, Mirror, Mirage” I consider, in the context of Brexit, the attraction and repulsion of different senses of “we” that come into conflict in the idea of Europe.

we inherit, hold in trust, and pass on. We have a duty towards it and towards those who will come and inhabit the world after us. In Price's novel, Tomasi muses:

It surprised him sometimes to think about the nature of blood, and title, and how his name Tomasi did not belong to him but was only borrowed from those who had gone before, to be held in trust for those who would come after, like the great houses themselves, all of which were gone now. (Price 263)

Similarly, in Banti's novel, Lopresti wants to scratch his name on the wall of the prison where he is held, placing himself in a chain of generations that, like him, have suffered; he sees other names and dates scratched on the walls by other former prisoners, many executed since; he imagines (biofictionally, as it were) their stories, their appearance, and feels part of a community of like-minded patriots, political prisoners who have sacrificed everything, even their lives, for freedom and justice across the prisons of Italy and of Europe (Banti 145-146). There is, that is – despite Lopresti's repugnance at his own autobiographical effort – a biofictional impulse at the heart of the sense of community and of the better world one wants to create. It is also the impulse that spurs the desire to transmit one's history, or that of a relative, a grandfather or great-grandfather whose inheritance – material, ideological, of memories and identity, of name; and of course, genetic – both determines who we are and must in turn be passed on.

John Banville, *Doctor Copernicus*

In James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the child Stephen Dedalus writes in his geography book:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe

(Joyce 12)

This desire to identify one's place within both the very local and the infinitely large is part of the young artist's ongoing search for a linguistic, conceptual and political relation to the world. The same desire (including echoes of Joyce's novel) drives the child Nicolas Koppernigk from the start of *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) by the Irish writer John Banville, an intricately constructed *Kunstlerroman* about the astronomer who displaced "Man" from the centre of the cosmos and of creation with his heliocentric theory and who is shown to be engaged in a desperate quest to grasp and describe the truth of the universe. This truth comes to him in a vision, as a theory that is both "radical act of creation" and radical rupture with tradition and with the dominant culture of his time (Banville 83-85). If for Lucio Piccolo in *Lampedusa* the role of literature was the recording of a vanishing world, here the creative imagination is crucial to bringing into existence a new cosmos. This clear, pure vision, the vivid truth intuited in the instant, slips away as soon as he tries to translate it into words. Moreover, Copernicus knows that people would be angered and scared by the loss of their place at the centre of the universe where their religious and cultural beliefs placed them, and he is afraid to publish his revolutionary treatise.

Nicolas however is not only an astronomer, and he is shown engaging in politics, in diplomacy, in the administration of the estate of the church, in medicine, and in economics. Copernicus, whose father, a merchant, taught him "the meaning of money" (Banville 6) wrote a detailed treatise for the Prussian Diet to implement a reform of the monetary system; he thus also takes his place within the nascent modern capitalist economic structure, linking it with the new cosmology as well as with the historical religious and military wars of the time. Historically, his name became the battleground for different nationalisms, appropriated by Nazi Germany (he was a genius, so he must be German and couldn't possibly be a Pole) and by Polish nationalists (he *was* a Pole, proving the ethnicity's capacity for greatness and giving legitimacy to the nation). In the novel, his brother-in-law stops speaking to him after he "had refused to declare himself, by inclination if not strictly by birth, a true German"; his uncle, Bishop Lucas, "resolved that difficulty straightaway. 'You are not German, nephew, no, nor are you a Pole, not even a Prussian. You are an Ermlander, simple. Remember it'" (Banville 94). Over these nationalist squabbles, Copernicus opts not for cosmopolitanism but for the cosmos and for his identity as a cosmographer: his acquiescence "was only one more mask. Behind it was that which no name nor nation could claim. He was Doctor Copernicus" (94).

At the end of the novel – in a way that may recall Lopresti’s final acceptance of the collective “we” – when Copernicus is on his deathbed, he hears the music of the spheres not in the cold distant cosmos whose truth he had sought and failed to capture but in the voices of the common people, of their daily existence (“and Nicolas, straining to catch that melody, heard the voices of evening rising to meet him from without: the herdsman’s call, the cries of children at play, the rumbling of the carts returning from market; and there were other voices too [...] of the sea, of the earth itself, turning in its course [...]” 242). As it traces, fictionally, the biography of the scientist, *Doctor Copernicus* thus also considers the historically shifting complex of social, historical, cultural, religious, scientific, legal knowledge and relationships that constitute the world and our place within it, through a literary form which, centred on the individual life, conceives – to use Hayot’s words – of “cosmology [...] as a world-imagining force that, ‘[...] addressed not only questions of physics and physical creation but of geography, translation, politics, and history’” (Hayot 229). It is that complexity and interconnectedness that Nicolas had disregarded in his quest for the absolute truth of the universe, and which he only grasps at the point of death.

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*

My final example, which I can also only discuss very briefly, is Vladimir Nabokov’s semi-autobiographical *Dar (The Gift)*, a *Kunstlerroman* which is not a biofiction as such but contains one, and which encompasses many of the questions and dilemmas raised by biofiction, including the quest for the place of the self in the world.

The Gift – a eulogy to Russia and Russian literature – was the last book that Nabokov wrote in Russian, in 1935-37, when he was living as an exile in Berlin. The narrator is the young poet Fyodor, who lives in Berlin among the circle of Russian émigrés after the October revolution. He is encouraged by his mother to write a biography of his father, in particular of his travels as a naturalist. As he imagines the father’s adventures, he sees what the father had seen (“I now imagine the outfitting of my father’s caravan [...] I see the caravan [...] Farther I see the mountains [...]”); then he imagines himself travelling with the father, so that the “he” becomes “we,” “us,” “our” (“our caravan moved east [...] On occasion we would pass the day [...] At other times we would be attacked [...] Spring awaited us [...]”); until Fyodor is actually there so that he *remembers* – rather than imagine – events; he replaces the father, the resemblance between them misleading the people he meets into mistaking him for the older man (“That same day, I remember, we glimpsed [...] since they were unable to distinguish a light-haired European from a white-haired one they took me, a

young chap with hair bleached in the sun, for an ancient old man”), until the father disappears altogether and the story becomes a first-person one: “Having explored the uplands in Tibet I headed for Lob-Nor in order to return from there to Russia” (Nabokov *The Gift* 110-17).

Later in the novel, almost as a natural progression from that failed quest to write the life of the father and which had resulted into what may be seen as an autofictional displacement of the biographical, Fyodor decides to write the biography of the Russian nineteenth-century critic, writer and intellectual Nikolay Chernyshevski, not as a straightforward factual biography but as a novelistic one: (“‘I’ll write,’ said Fyodor Konstantinovich jokingly, ‘a biography of Chernyshevski. [...] Or a novel’” (179). And he adds, entering directly into the biofictional fray:

I want to keep everything as it were on the very brink of parody. You know those idiotic “*biographies romancées*” where Byron is coolly slipped a dream extracted from one of his own poems? And there must be on the other hand an abyss of seriousness, and I must make my way along this narrow ridge between my own truth and a caricature of it (184).

Fyodor’s ironic and at times counterfactual treatment of a respected intellectual of nineteenth-century Russia does not encounter the favour of the émigré literary circles of Berlin, and he has difficulty publishing it; similarly, Nabokov had difficulty publishing a novel that included the biofiction of Chernyshevski; *Dar* initially appeared serially in 1937-38 without the biofictional fourth chapter, and it wasn’t published in full, in Russian, until 1952, in New York. The English translation would follow in 1963.

Interestingly, both *Dar*, Nabokov’s last novel in Russian, and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, his first in English, both use and reflect explicitly on the biographical form. The historical changes that brought to an end the Russian world before the October Revolution in 1917 and the linguistic and cultural displacement generated by the emigration appear to have brought to the fore not just the need for the writer to record a world that is fading (as in *Lampedusa*) or the need to imagine a new one (as in *Doctor Copernicus*), but also the value of the biographical-fictional form as a way of inquiring into the possibility of existence for the subject – how, in what language, in what forms, under what legal provisions, does the subject exist, as citizen of what world, with what relationships to the world that has been left behind and the one that needs to be moved into but is as yet unknown? Nabokov would continue to come back, over and over again, to the creation of

alternative subjects, doubles, copies or projections (including self-projections) whose original is uncertain, and to the biographical in order to explore the difficult, ghostly boundaries between selves¹² – as if those questions could not be settled once and for all for the writer whose world had disappeared.¹³

Biofiction as the Writing of the World

In their reflections on the relationship between bio, fiction and world – as set of relations that are economic, political and historical and enact hegemonies and power, structures that determine material lives and the relationships between people and places – these texts place themselves at the heart of the tension between *oikos* and *oikouménē*, in their etymological and historically evolving meanings that include place as home, as family, as what one owns, and as earth, as inhabited world, as particular *locus* in the world; and participate in a cosmography, as “world-imagining force” that is, literally, a writing of the world, while continuing to interrogate which world and whose world they are envisaging in their creations.

¹² In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, for example, the narrator, who has been trying to write the biography of his half-brother, ends the narrative with the words, “Sebastian’s mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows” (171). In the later *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974) the narrator writes about “a dream feeling that my life was the non-identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man’s life, somewhere on this or another earth. A demon, I felt, was forcing me to impersonate that other man, that other writer who was and would always be incomparably greater, healthier, and crueler than your obedient servant” (76).

¹³ I could only touch on Banville’s and Nabokov’s complex and immensely rich novels very briefly here; I discussed both at some greater length in *Biografie fittizie*, and *Doctor Copernicus* in “Keeping Our Nerve.”

WORKS CITED

- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Auerbach, Eric. "Philology and World Literature." Translated with an introduction by Maire and Edward Said. *The Centennial Review* 13.1 (1969): 1-17.
- Banti, Anna. *Noi credevamo*. Milan: Mondadori, 1967.
- Banville, John. *Doctor Copernicus*. London: Minerva, 1976.
- Boldrini, Lucia. *Biografie fittizie e personaggi storici: (Auto)biografia, soggettività, teoria nel romanzo inglese contemporaneo*. Pisa: ETS, 1998.
- Boldrini, Lucia. "Keeping Our Nerve: Scientific and Historical Paradigms in John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*." *Primerjalna književnost* 30.3 (2007): 27-41 (in Slovenian); 141-57 (in English).
- Boldrini, Lucia. *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Boldrini, Lucia. "Constructing Character in an Unequal World: Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* and the Necessity of World Literature." *Foreign Language and Literature Research* 4 (2020): 9-28.
- Boldrini, Lucia. "Rock, Mirror, Mirage: Europe, Elsewhere." *Europe: The Clash of Projections*. Eds. Joep Leerssen, Vladimir Biti and Vivian Liska. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 99-120.
- Boldrini, Lucia. "Biofiction, Heterobiography and the Ethics of Speaking of, for and as Another." *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 6.1 (2022): 18-37.
- Buisine, Alain. "Biofictions." *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 224 (1991): 7-13.
- Casanova, Pascale. *La république mondiale des lettres*. Paris: Seuil, 1999.
- Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Cheah, Pheng. *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Cooppan, Vilashini, "World Literature Between History and Theory." *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. Eds. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir. London: Routledge, 2011. 194-203.
- Dainotto, Roberto M. *Europe (in Theory)*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

- Gallagher, Catherine. "What Would Napoleon Do? Historical, Fictional, and Counterfactual Characters." *New Literary History* 42.2 (2011): 315–36.
- Ganguly, Debjani. *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Goethe, J. W. *Correspondence between Goethe and Carlyle*. Ed. C. E. Norton. London and New York: Macmillan, 1887.
- Goethe, J. W. *Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann*. Trans. John Oxenford. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1998.
- Goldschmidt, Nora. *Afterlives of The Roman Poets: Biofiction and the Reception of Latin Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Gordimer, Nadine. "The Status of the Writer in the World Today: Which World? Whose World?" *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008*. London: Bloomsbury: 2010. 520-31.
- Hayot, Eric. "World Literature and Globalization." *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. Eds. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir. London: Routledge, 2011. 223-31.
- Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ed. Jeri Johnson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Kadir, Djelal. "To World, to Globalize – Comparative Literature's Crossroads." *Comparative Literature Studies* 41.1 (2004): 1-9.
- Lackey, Michael, ed. *Biographical Fiction: A Reader*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Lackey, Michael, ed. *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions across the Globe*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Lackey, Michael. *Biofiction: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2021.
- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. *The Communist Manifesto. A Modern Edition*. London: Verso, 2012.
- Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on World Literature." *Debating World Literature*. Ed. Christopher Prendergast. London: Verso, 2004. 148-62.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Look at the Harlequins!* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Gift*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.
- Orlando, Francesco. *Ricordo di Lampedusa (1962) seguito da "Da distanze diverse" (1996)*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996.
- Price, Steven. *Lampedusa*. London: Picador: 2020.

Tomasi di Lampedusa, Giuseppe. *The Leopard*. Trans. Guido Waldman. London: Vintage, 2007.

Tomasi di Lampedusa, Giuseppe. *Il gattopardo*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Visconti, Luchino, dir. *Il gattopardo*. Titanus, 1963.

WReC (Warwick Research Collective). *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015.