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Janet Malcolm and Me: The Biographer Enters Her Book: Some Post-Modern Reflections on the Personal of the Critical in Recent Biographies of Women Writers

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[Notes:
Brackets indicate information and annotations added for later posting to Digital Commons. As indicated, I have excised the long segment from the then soon-to- be- released biography, which is available in print and electronic editions. Mention of this paper appears briefly in my later conference presentation on "Novelizing the Feminist Biography," delivered virtually at SAMLA's 2021 conference. Of course, there is teaching value in Malcolm's work on Plath. When the paperback edition was released, I made it the supplemental text in my graduate section of Women's Literature. See further notes at the end for my continuing research on Elizabeth Robins.]

Biographers can get themselves placed on critical panels more frequently than they get placed in the creative camp of the University of Louisville's Literature Conference. This fact raises some interesting issues about the genre of literary biography in the late twentieth century. Because I cannot directly apply to the conference as a creative writer to read my forthcoming biography that is in some places creatively dramatized, I will instead take a "scholarly" approach to my own material. But in so examining my work, I am heartened by its links to important questions of the biographer's relationship to her subject and to her sources.

Largely because publishers resist the expenses of precise and plentiful documentation, contemporary biography is a slippery, sometimes stale, sometimes slimy, but sometimes electrifying discipline. If any recent biographical project deserves further attention and analysis, it is Janet Malcolm's three-part biography of Sylvia Plath, first appearing in the August 23 and 30, 1993 double issue of the *New Yorker* and now published in book form as *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Knopf, 1994). With the perspective of an autobiographer examining (yet never mentioning) the incendiary implications of her own "missing tapes" incident which led to the *New Yorker's* defense of her in the libel suit against her from a much earlier article (turned into the book, *In the Freud Archives),* Malcolm takes us to her interviews and speculates on the complexities of the biographer's stance. [At a second trial, concluded after the delivery of this paper, Malcolm was absolved of libel damages in the suit filed against her by Jeffrey M. Masson: "Psychoanalyst Loses Libel Suit

Against a New Yorker Reporter": *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1994, p.1+.] In the essays on Plath, Malcolm, without footnotes, but frequently reminding us that she has her tape-recorder playing to confirm her citations, uses her position as maligned writer almost in a defiant insistence that the court's finding against her can be rendered irrelevant if only she can properly credit these sources, assure us that these permissions and the conditions under which she secured these permissions were legitimate. With specific self-reflexivity in which she incorporates the surrounding "atmosphere" during her interviews, she speculates, takes sides, draws conclusions from her extensive quotations, asks for sympathy, and poses some post-modern questions about the nature of biographical style.

Malcolm is in a unique and somewhat surprising position. Having been initially found guilty of libel through her rearrangement and reconstruction of quotations, she enters the bloody waters of the feud between the Hughes family and the Sylvia Plath sympathizers as if all the prior blood spilt were so much ether for anesthetizing. She asserts several times that she places herself in the camp sympathetic to Hughes; yet, as she documents her odyssey, her quotations of Hughes's pleas for his and his children's privacy serve partially, at least, to indict him for his self-interests even further. As *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported, Malcolm's self-conscious approach was the concern of "speaker after speaker" at last fall's conference, "The Seductions of Biography," in Cambridge, Massachusetts. What is most intriguing, of course, is not the fact that Malcolm shows herself to be operating, in the words of *The*

Chronicle, like a "thief exploiting other people's secrets," but that she maintains that even the most objective and scholarly biography ends up being utterly biased and personally subjective. [Winkler, Karen J. "'Seductions of Biography'." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 40, no. 10, 1993, pp. A4, A14,15. *ProQuest*. Malcolm herself, as reported by Winkler, characterizes the biographer as thief in the recent *New Yorker* article.]

For years, I have created the personae of semi-fictionalized biographers who have entered into and shaped the biographies and dramatized biographies I have written. With the publication next week (March 1994) of my biography of Elizabeth Robins, I reflect here upon the phenomena of entering one's work with both an affinity for Malcolm's power to engage and stir debate as well as a heightened sense of self-analysis in light of my own, very distinct and long-practiced form.

In many ways, the form takes altogether too many liberties to be considered legitimate; in other ways, it is innovative in a creative way. Malcolm has the advantage of pursuing her subject, Sylvia Plath, from a perspective that claims to explore the broader questions of the biographical form. Like my own work, hers is intensely self-reflective. She, however, has the advantage of exploring a subject much written about, protected, mythologized, celebrated, psychoanalyzed, and widely debated. Malcolm's biography is also a compendium of other biographies and a journalist's odyssey through many interviews which revisit the trivial and important aspects of refiguring Plath from the different perspectives of eyewitnesses and previous

interpreters. From the beginning, Malcolm refuses to hesitate in aligning her sympathies with the most dismissed of the Plath biographers (for she went to school with Anne Stevenson); yet she pushes on, finding other intriguing sympathies as well. She seems, kaleidoscopically, to shift her angle of sympathy each time she revisits a site of subjectivity in the Plath saga. If any common denominators arise in Malcolm's accounts of the previous biographers of Sylvia Plath, they include these assertions: (1) her poetry might better be informed by the manic-depressive condition of her psyche, and (2) her death by suicide continues to generate oppositional sides in the chronicles of who might be to blame for a brilliant career shortchanged by desperation.

My task was different, for I am, in effect, the first biographer of a woman writer whose career spanned decades and continents. There were only a few requisite interviews with those who could remember Elizabeth Robins or who corresponded with her. Most of the interpretation was to be gleaned from the massive stash of her private papers: decades of diaries, correspondence, drafts of manuscripts never published and over twenty published volumes of fiction, short fiction, memoirs, and a politically charged play. I would further explain the difference between what Malcolm writes and my style as the difference between displaying the self by showing the biographer/interviewer/critic in process and, for me, the recreating of one's self by writing the self into an imaginative scene of the supposed life of the biographical subject.

Just now, when I am at the verge of being attacked or celebrated by the reviewers and critics, I have felt the need to make a self-examination of what led to the form I use in my first published biography. My dramatizing tactics come from my own long background in creative playwriting. As a class project when I directed student actors, I adapted Joan Baez's *Daybreak* for a Readers' Theatre script. (Almost twenty years later, in October 1992, the same week I turned in my scholarly accomplishments for my tenure review, I found myself returning to the "Autobiographical Voice of Joan Baez," examining her songwriting and her two books for a critical paper at a professional conference.) The Readers' Theatre format of the Baez project allowed for multiple actors to speak as Joan, a format necessary for my young, all female students, for instinctively they were desperate to play "the lead." In a graduate English class that was initiated by an MLA project to encourage Lost Voices of Women from a regional perspective, I got my first real taste of archival work, at the Schlesinger, working with the Maud Wood Park Papers. (Little remembered is that her private collection forms the nucleus of the Women's Rights Collection.) My class work included a sprawling multi-voiced dramatization that gave credit to the playwrighting career of Park, in addition to her leadership roles with suffrage campaigns. I have also used a multiple personae format in the dramatizations of the life stories of Fanny Kemble, Beatrix Potter, and Aphra Behn--often framing or contextualizing the story of their lives with other women who were attracted to some part of the life. The Beatrix Potter project arose from a position I had as drama instructor at Belvoir Terrace in

Lenox, Massachusetts. I combined a younger class's dramatization of one of her tales, "The Roly Poly Pudding" with an older class presenting multiple facets of the author illustrator. Both *Aphra Behn* and *Fanny Kemble* were entrants for the W. K. Rose Fellowship, awarded each year to a young Vassar Graduate. In *Fanny Kemble*, an older actress trying to make a comeback with a solo performance piece based on Kemble's memoirs is saved from failure because a disillusioned children's book biographer and a class studying the actress's life in preparation for the show come together to perform as an ensemble. In *Aphra Behn: Playwright*, an anthropologist, a librarian, and a critic enter into Aphra Behn's defense of her life. I cringe whenever I think back on the strange tone that I created--with three actresses debating the merits of their combined achievement as Aphra Behn, interspersed with the modern biographer's psyche also split many ways. Yet I cannot help but feel some satisfaction when I note that the year, twenty years ago, I devoted to my research and writing of Aphra Behn was the same year that NEH awarded an established scholar a grant to write the first critical biography on her. [Angeline Goreau, in her *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn*, Dial Press, 1980, credits the National Endowment for the Humanities in the second sentence of her Acknowledgements, page *v*, for the "time and freedom I needed to begin research."]

Like Malcolm's observation of the phenomenon of the unsent letter, the woman writer's journal is highly experimental, intensely searching for answers. And in the

journal, one frees herself for direct address. Journal Writing itself, I would argue, is part of the feminist's grasping at some--any--rope as a survival mechanism. My biography "found" its unusual form in a flash of creativity in my journal which, in turn, arose from a prolonged struggle with and disappointment over my situation as a graduate student. My dissertation director had encouraged me to recast all I had written and thought I was done with. She asserted that I needed some "glue" to hold together my long chapters which treated multi-year phases of Robins' most productive periods as double commitments: to family and career, to acting on tour and to her husband, to Ibsen and to establishing her credentials as a fiction writer. I did not act upon what my dissertation director had said until I experienced a tremendous loss of temper and subsequent adrenalin surge (because housemates were hosting a big graduation bash, because my space in the driveway was taken, because I wanted to work and my computer and bed and entire semi-private space were adjacent to the party room). I calmed my rage by turning to my journal to reflect upon the intensity of my stupid fury. Out of that arose the idea for the "dramatic episodes" which precede and set the tone for each of now eight chapters and a dramatized epilogue.

Because these scenically scripted introductions to each chapter are drawn directly, and in some cases nearly verbatim, from Robins' own letters and diaries and speeches, I could document my sources and yet justify the creative license I took. Chapter 1 dramatizes Elizabeth Robins' interview with Lawrence Barrett in Zanesville, Ohio, just as she recreated it in her letter to her father announcing her determination

to go on the stage. Chapter 2 begins with the interview Robins and Marion Lea had with Edmund Gosse, in which they manipulate him into believing that they will be more faithful to his translation of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* than the adapter whom Gosse has given permission to stage the play. Chapter 3 focuses its new direction in Elizabeth Robins' career, her efforts to write fiction under a pseudonym; using a series of letters in the archive (her letters to Florence Bell), I stage a dinner party in which Henry James entertained others by relating the dream he had of Elizabeth Robins and the "devilish girl" dressed in red he had attempted to warn her of. Chapter 4 preserves the enthusiasm Robins recorded when she persuaded Edward Burne-Jones to design the stage settings for her proposed production of Rossetti's "Sister Helen." Chapter 5 begins with a montage of the occasions when she was psychically and physically close to her little brother Raymond. She went to Nome, Alaska, in 1900, to save him from his fate on the cold frontier and found herself inextricably linked to his mesmerizing personality and the use of Alaska in her fiction. Chapter 6 recreates the occasion when Robins first spoke before a Women's Suffrage banquet to honor women prisoners released from Holloway Gaol, taken from the speech published in the important 1913 volume of her suffrage advocacy. Chapter 7 finds Robins at the graveside of her husband, opening the grave in which he had been buried for twenty-five years in order to authenticate the quarter-century it took for Robins to come to terms with his suicide. In the dramatic scene which begins Chapter 8, Robins interviews a leading Egyptologist at the British Museum to verify the "collegiate" status of women in an

ancient civilization. This cultured anthropologist taunts Robins with the derisive boasting that a woman's most elevated position was her status as concubine. Robins went back to her original diary account of her interview to recreate the scene, slightly fictionalized so that it would be understood to be Everywoman's experience, in her 1924 treatise that she subtitled *An Indictment of Sex Antagonism.* In that work, *Ancilla's Share*, she also stresses that women's lives are not well enough documented and offers the haunting self-prediction, "The biography is, indeed, the life."

Janet Malcolm counters this speculation, maintaining that "Only in nonfiction does the question of what happened and how people thought and felt remain open" (Malcolm, 138). Fiction gives us at least a truth, she suggests. But the more one cites reliable sources for the verification of a biographical incident, the more one hints at the infinite variability of the truth of biography.

So, too, with any conspicuously inventive biography. My Epilogue itself arose from another act of desperation with my journal. I was enroute to Hartford, Connecticut from Des Moines, with a long layover in the busy O'Hare Airport in Chicago. I had hardly slept the night before, but knew that if I could hold out until I found my seat on the plane, I could enjoy a proper nap. How could I stay awake, though? I found the busiest coffee shop, tried to read and then to write something productive, but discovered that the only way I could maintain any degree of alertness was to force myself to record, as furiously as I could, all that was happening around me. I "dwindled," if you will, from a meditative mode of journal writing to an observation

mode. But, in the desperation to maintain control over my alertness, another adrenalin push forced another brainstorm: in a flash I came upon the format for my epilogue to the Elizabeth Robins biography. I knew it would consist of a biographer interviewing her subject; I knew it must be a fluid format, in which the biographer was not necessarily me; I did not want the experience of the interview with Elizabeth Robins to be mystic, for I had previously used something of the sort in my MFA thesis. That thesis for my dramaturgy degree from U Mass Amherst included not merely a calendared account of production decisions worked out by a team of translators, scenic lighting and costume designers, director, actors; it included along with this perspective of the dramaturg's role in the U Mass production of *Hedda Gabler* a creative leap into the past which allowed me to pass through a time warp and visit the rehearsals of the London production and even to entertain Ibsen himself. Earlier, to prove my knowledge base at the second year, or journeyman level, I examined the reception of Ibsen in England in the early 1890s using a creative, epistolary novella format, inventing characters who were present at productions or who worked in photography studios of the time.

Once I had found the "glue," for my dissertation, I worked for a long while on a very free-form format of this epilogue with four fluid voices who reinvented themselves each time they spoke, so that Robins' own voice sometimes evaporated into a critical view that became interrogative, self-reflective, full of defense or

prediction. (This original version is how I concluded the dissertation version, available in ProQuest Dissertations.) Then, for the published book, I pared that down to a generic secretary who also spoke as "Biographer," in a scene that was given (like my chapter dramatizations), a specific time and place, when "Elizabeth" herself worked on her facets of her autobiography with a secretary at the Vassar Alumnae House in 1942.

[Partly due to time constraints because a fourth paper was added to the panel, the delivered version of this paper omitted the excerpts from the book. Refer to pages 255-258 of the corrected proof*: Elizabeth Robins 1862-1952: Actress, Novelist, Feminist*.]

Obviously, in the back of my mind, at least, I sense that Robins is a subject ripe for a teleplay treatment. [I teased a different audience with a slight suggestion of scenes from her life, at the Fales Library NYU event to announce the formal opening of the collection in April, 1986. Katharine Houghton, whom I had met when researching one-woman shows, was the event's keynote speaker.] However, I have to confess, after seeing what happened to *Zelda* on TNT (and without Nancy Milford's sanction), that I remain a scholar, one who might sooner find some way to "stage" the delivery of footnotes that might be part of an academic biography before I would partake of a cinema transformation of my material.

My experience naturally finds the creative injection of the personal in biography long overdue. Perhaps Janet Malcom and I have muddied the waters, in different ways. Or perhaps we have clarified that biography is entirely subjective. Reviewers have only enthusiastic praise and wondrous enthusiasm when creative writers 'mine' the biographical sources for their material. (Parenthetically, I should stress that critics, too, have become more cleverly creative in their investigations of the literary text. A case in point is Marilyn Hoder-Salmon's reading of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. She forthrightly announces the melding of scholarly approach and creative reading in her subtitle, "Screenplay as Interpretation," University Press of Florida, 1992.) But to return to imaginative uses of the lives of writers: Emily Dickinson appears as persona in poems by Susan Snively, Adrienne Rich, Madeline DeFrees, and many others. *The New Yorker* carried several years ago the story by Cynthia Ozick which theorizes a reading of George Eliot's marriage to John Cross in order to make use of absurdist parallels in a modern relationship. [Ozick, "Putttermesser Paired," *New Yorker*, 8 Oct. 1990, pp.40+.] Poseidon Press has been publicizing the critical acclaim for Carol De Chellis Hill's novel, *Henry James' Midnight Song*, which reviewer Linda Simon praises because it "revives," with "rare intuition" the figures of Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Sigmund Freud, those people who have, in Simon's words, "tested the talents even of their own biographers." (Quoted from ad copy of *New York Times* September 23, 1993, page B2, an extract of Linda Simon's *New York Review of Books'* review of Hill's novel.)

Many feminists became biographers as a result of Nancy Milford's *Zelda;* Carolyn Heilbrun marks this book as the beginning of a new phase in her collecting the lives of women; Clarice Stasz had conceived *American Dreamers,* the double biography of Jack and Charmian London, as her (Charmian's) biography, largely as a result of Nancy Milford's *Zelda*'s influence upon a new generation of feminist biographers. Elizabeth Robins herself, in the first decade of this century, urged the Women Writers' Suffrage League to write the lives of women. She admired Mrs. Gaskell's proximity to her subject and herself borrowed from the atmosphere of Charlotte Brontë and Brontë's fictional worlds to shape several of her stories [most notably "White Violets"]. She made plans to dramatize the saga of Loreta Janeta Velazquez, the Cuban-born cross-dresser who took the male persona of Harry Buford and fought and spied for the Confederacy in the Civil War. [Information on this project is noted in my dissertation, "Sometimes Suppressed," p. 527, but the reference is not in the published biography. Diary entries by Robins indicate her travel to the British Library in 1911-1912 to read a copy of Velazquez' *The Woman in Battle,* which she styles as "Harry Buford." No manuscript of this description has surfaced.]

And I must have thought, back in the balmy days of graduate school, that I was the first to discover scene writing as a feminist act! I prepared my report to a Lost Women Writers seminar in the form of my interview with Maud Wood Park; I used my scholarly perspective on the early drafts of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, where I discovered how Woolf had written her female narrator out of her structure, as an

influence for the way I directed a staged reading of that novel. Writing one's self out of *The Waves*, which is easy to read as her fictionalized elegy for her brother Thoby, is equivalent to the objectification of her Roger Fry material; Woolf presumed, for that one biographical project, she could not personalize any biographical portrait. In a final exam for Women's History, I gave my long dead mother a voice, for I used my dream of her handing me a missing document from the Robins archive to resolve the dilemma of my research distancing me from my family. Certainly, modern feminist biographers--including the Edna O'Brien's among us, who cannot resist experimenting with the dramatized biography--have reshaped their genre and redefined the wider canon of significant women writers. They have done more than that; for, in their associations with their subjects, they have consciously and deliberately invited themselves into literary history.

NOTES: Because performances of Edna O'Brien's stage play, Virginia (an account of the writer Virginia Woolf as she was influenced by her father, mother, husband, other writers and associates), were featured as part of the Louisville conference, I incorporated this reference in my conclusion.

[Other biographers who have creatively entered their own work of course include Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (New Directions, 1985) and Sue Walker's creative take on Carson McCullers, entitled *It's Good Weather for Fudge: Conversing with Carson McCullers* (New South Books, 2007, with introduction by Virginia Spencer

Carr. Both Carr and Walker wrote dissertations on McCullers. In addition to these, readers might be interested in two volumes of poetry by Carol Simmons Oles, *Waking Stone: Inventions on the Life of Harriet Hosmer* and *Night Watches: Inventions on the Life of Maria Mitchell*. These, along with *The Age of Phillis* by Honorée Fanon Jeffers, prove that explanatory footnotes and academic musings can be integrated with autobiographic poetic impressions of the poet / dramatist / biographer. These titles are in no way meant to be an exhaustive nor comprehensive list. In a later presentation (for SAMLA's Virtual Conference, 2021), I make reference to this paper, but stress how different Malcolm's presence is in her biography than in mine. That presentation, "Novelizing the Feminist Biography from Nancy Milford's *Zelda* to the Present: What are the Ethics of Sourcing?" suggests that novelists and adaptations from them are not giving responsible credit to their biographical sources.]

Updates for 2022 posting: I continue to be engaged with Elizabeth Robins research. The Elizabeth Robins Web, established in 1996 at Jacksonville State University where I am now professor emerita, includes a chronology and updated bibliographies. Links to Sue Thomas' bibliography and major online texts and repositories are included. Digital Commons, at the JSU Library, is the repository for my conference papers that grew out of extended research. I edited a version of *Votes for Women*, Robins' 1907 suffrage play that is based on the Harley Granville-Barker promptbook, and I co-edited *The Alaska-Klondike Diary of Elizabeth Robins, 1900*.

Links

Robins Web, https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/

Chronology with links to texts, https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/erchron.html

Updated bibliographies, https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/jgpaps/index.html

ABSTRACT

Largely because publishers resist the expenses of precise and plentiful documentation, contemporary biography is a slippery, sometimes stale, but sometimes electrifying discipline. If any recent biographical project deserves further attention and analysis, it is Janet Malcolm's three-part biography of Sylvia Plath, first appearing in the August 23 and 30, 1993 double issue of the *New Yorker* and now published in book form as *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Knopf, 1994). With the perspective of an autobiographer examining (yet never mentioning) the incendiary implications of her own "missing tapes" incident which led to the *New Yorker's* defense of her in the libel suit against her from a much earlier article (turned into the book, *In the Freud Archives),* Malcolm takes us to her interviews and speculates on the complexities of the biographer's stance.

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is intensely self-reflective. She, however, has the advantage of tapping into a persona who is much written about, protected, mythologized, celebrated, psychoanalyzed, and widely debated. Malcolm's biography is also a compendium of other biographies and a journalist's odyssey through many interviews.

Key Words

Reclaiming Elizabeth Robins, Janet Malcolm, Sylvia Plath, Silent Woman, Elizabeth Robins Web, Feminist Biography, Literary Biography, Creative Biography, Novelizing the Feminist Biography, Virginia Woolf

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