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Hermione Lee: Portrait of the Biographer as a Biographee

TL: So you're never tempted to write fiction?

HL: No, I can't do it.

TL: What about autobiography—or your reaction to a biographer who wished to write your life?

HL: I think that's very unlikely!

I certainly am very wary of writing about myself.

And I'm actually quite private, although I lead a rather public life, within this small environment.¹

Recently, a childhood friend of my daughter spent the night at my house while her parents were out of town. It was only the two of us as my daughter was out for the evening. Scanning my bookshelves while stretched on my couch, the 15-year old D. asked: 'Why do you have so many books by Virginia Woolf? What did she write?' As I was struggling to answer in a way that would make sense for this teenager who, though a reader, had not been exposed to much else than contemporary young adult literature, she added that she had noticed on my daughter's desk a notebook with a reproduction on its cover of Vanessa Bell's art work for the original edition of *To The Lighthouse*, published by Hogarth Press in 1927. With simple—and I hoped convincing—words, I painted a portrait of the writer, explained why I was attracted to her work, which novels and essays were my favorites, and ended by a cursory summary of *To the Lighthouse*. The next day, before picking her up from the club where she trains as a rower, I stopped by my neighborhood bookstore and bought her a copy: I don't know when and if she'll actually read it, but to my pleasure, her eyes lit up when I gave it to her.

This moment reminded me of Hermione Lee's account of her own discovery of Woolf, as a child visiting a family friend and exploring the pile of books left on the night stand by the bed where she was to sleep:

When I was eight or nine I went away on a visit (this was rather unusual for me) and stayed the night with friends. There was one book on the table by my bed. It was the 1951 orange Penguin edition of *The Waves*, with on the cover, the price, 1s. 6d., the words 'Fiction' in orange letters along the sides, and, on either side of the image of a penguin, the words 'Complete' and 'Unabridged.' On the back was a brief biography of Virginia Woolf underneath the 1929 Lenare photograph. I don't think I was aware of any of these details, but I do vividly remember starting to read the first few pages without understanding much of what was going on, and feeling as if I had happened on a secret language which belonged to me. It was part of the

¹ 'The Life Biographic: An Interview with Hermione Lee,' by Urvashi Vashist, *The Literateur*, 21 June 2012, <http://literateur.com/hermione-lee/> (all online articles here have been accessed for the last time on 9 October 2016).

excitement of being away from home on my own. This was my discovery. I didn't get very far, and I don't remember my subsequent return to the novel. But that sense of a secret discovery remained with me, and left an echo-track in later readings.²

Even if she hadn't yet heard of Woolf, Lee grew up in a 'literary household,' where reading was one of the favourite pleasures. Josephine Lee, her mother, 'highly intelligent and imaginative,' was self-educated: she 'had grown up in a poor working-class family in London in the 1920s and had had to leave school at fifteen.'³ After working briefly for the publisher Jonathan Cape, she married Benjamin, a general practitioner who loved classical music and was a 'very good amateur cellist.'⁴ Their two daughters grew up in the middle of books, and to the sound of Bartok's string quartets and cello concertos.

Lee remembers 'a rich, classical diet of middle-class children's books: *Alice and Pooh*, E. Nesbitt, the Narnia books and Tolkien.'⁵ At four she had learned to read, and was soon given the run of her mother's library, an important collection despite its having been cut in half by a bombing during the Blitz. As many of us do, Lee associates books with places and times, and she has a distinct memory of the moment she left behind children's literature for adult books: 'I was nine or ten, in a hotel room in Bordeaux. I had run out of holiday reading, and my mother gave me the book she'd just finished. It was *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in the Macmillan red and cream paperback. [...] I was reading my first adult book. I skipped the descriptions, got bored by the rustics, and fell passionately in love with Farmer Boldwood.'⁶ And she concludes: 'the pattern was set for adolescence.'

Her passion for reading recognized by all, she was this 'skinny, serious child with round spectacles and long, dark hair' sitting in the corner of her parents' living room, always with her nose in a book: 'A culture hound,' she says of herself back then, an image against which she never rebelled: 'I just carried on.'

When the time came for the sisters to go to school, they were first sent to the Lycée Français de Londres, because, she recalls:

They [her parents] wanted us, me and my older sister, to have more than one language. They wanted us to be slightly outside—for a while at least—the standard English educational system. And they were very Europhile, very Francophile. They were typical of certain kinds of postwar, culture-loving, travel-hungry English, longing to get to France and Italy. They loved French and Italian and Russian literature, and they were passionate about music, opera, theatre.⁷

Her sister became bilingual in French and was to use her skills professionally, teaching and translating, while Hermione's years at the Lycée gave her a solid knowledge of the language, an appetite for literature and a genuine interest for other cultures. After

² Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1997, p. 757.

³ 'Hermione Lee: The Art of Biography No. 4,' interview with Louisa Thomas, *Paris Review*, No. 205 (Summer 2013), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6231/the-art-of-biography-no-4-hermione-lee>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Hermione Lee, in *The Pleasure of Reading. 43 Writers on the Discovery of Reading and the Books that Inspired Them*, Antonia Fraser (ed.), London, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 226.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Paris Review*, *op. cit.*

transferring first to the City of London School for Girls, she spent her final school years, between 1963 and 1965⁸, at Queen's College, a well-reputed establishment for girls.

Oxford is where she chose to study literature, first at St Hilda's, an all-women's college at the time, and then for her graduate work at St Cross. Studying literature at Oxford at the end of the 60's was a mixed experience: criticism sometimes took precedence over original works, and the discovery of the canon made English feel like 'a foreign language' she needed to relearn⁹. If she still found time for a bit of the 'addictive, enchanted reading' she enjoyed as a child, curled up with Virginia Woolf or Ford Madox Ford (the latter 'forever associated with a later 1960's rainy day in a messy student flat in Cowley Road, Oxford'¹⁰), she also experienced 'odd gratifications from the peculiar archaic Oxford English syllabus still in place in the 1960's.'¹² Upon her Master's Degree graduation in 1970, she applied for a position as teaching assistant at William and Mary, one of the oldest American colleges in the heart of Virginia. There, while teaching British literature, she immersed herself in the works of nineteenth-century American authors: 'I came to all the magnificent writers who would have been part of my adolescent reading if I had been an American child—Whitman, Dickinson, Twain, Hawthorne—and whom I've been reading and teaching ever since.'¹³

Back in England the following year, she first got a position at the University of Liverpool, from where, five years later, she went to the University of York. There she taught for 20 years, climbing steadily the ladder of academia. In 1998 when she left York to go back to Oxford, she was a full professor of English, and had published four books, a multitude of articles, had hosted a literary show on Channel 4, been a judge for the Booker Prize, had a name as a critic, writing for the *London Review of Book* as well as for the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Yorker*, and was the acclaimed author of the newest biography of Virginia Woolf.

When I read Hermione Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf in 1997, I was interested in the subject because it was presented as *the* biography. I, myself, was writing on Woolf—a short portrait of the novelist as a writer—and this hefty tome could not be ignored, though its weight (material and intellectual) scared me more than I cared to admit. But that fear did not last. While Lee's biography brought to light new archival material and took into account the most recent critical works, it was carried throughout, from page 1 to page 761 of my Knopf edition, by a voice that captivated my attention and made me forget my apprehensions. From the very beginning, instead of retreating behind the supposed objectivity of the biographer, Lee firmly asserts her subjective presence, humbly establishing that her work can only be her vision of the woman and the writer. In the first chapter, entitled 'Biography,' she questions the genre itself, makes room for Woolf's views and reviews the approaches of previous biographers while the last chapter is a self-portrait of the biographer herself... Simultaneously bold, authoritative and humble, Lee shows that just as a painter has a distinctive palette, she has a unique style, a voice.

⁸ <http://www.qcl.org.uk/life-after/former-pupils.php>

⁹ *Pleasure of reading, op. cit.*, p. 230.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

Not long after completing my little volume on Woolf, I read the two biographies Lee had published earlier, *Willa Cather: Double Lives* and *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, and have since eagerly awaited her publications: after Woolf's biography, she wrote the lives of Edith Wharton and most recently of Penelope Fitzgerald. Like Leon Edel, one of her illustrious predecessors, or Andrew Scott Berg, her American contemporary, Hermione Lee has inspired a following, people who read her books regardless of their subject. Such a following is usually the prerogative of the novelist, but by her transformation of the field of life-writing, she has succeeded in changing the way we read biographical works.

Her first two biographies in the late seventies were still very much in line with contemporary critical writing. Indeed *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* is, in Lee's own words, 'a critical study,' motivated by her desire to shed some light on a writer who she thought had 'been peculiarly neglected,' when in her critic's eyes she was 'an exceptional English novelist' who 'fuse[d] two traditions—that of Anglo-Irish literature and history, and that of a European modernism indebted to Flaubert and James.'¹⁴ While Bowen's life is discussed inasmuch as it is relevant to the novels and their writing, with *Willa Cather: Double Lives*, Hermione Lee gets closer to the biographical mode, to the actual writing of a life. Her research took her to the Midwest of the United States, to the state line between Nebraska and Kansas, to the 'Divide,' the high farmland where the French and Czech graveyards evoked in *My Antonia* have been preserved, but this pilgrimage, as she calls it herself, only confirmed her opinion: it had 'ultimately not much to do with a reading of her novels.'¹⁵ So she concluded that Cather was not to be found in Red Cloud, and the writer—who had made biographical work difficult, as most of her personal documents were still inaccessible to researchers at the time—was not an easy subject for a biography. Nor could one account for her fictions in 'biographical terms': 'Like the image of the rock which she places at the centre of many of her books, she is a resistant subject, even an obstructive one. When you set out to write about her, you feel she would not have liked what you are doing, and would not have liked you either.'¹⁶ So instead of sticking to a life-writing model, Hermione Lee chose there a hybrid path, treating the first decades biographically and switching to a more critical approach at the publication of the first works: 'When, in the middle of her life, she at last begins to write novels, I turn away, to a great extent, from what happens in her life to what happens in her language. So I make the journey she invited her readers to take, into the fictional life stories, which she wanted to seem "not stories at all, but life itself."¹⁷

At the beginning of the 90's Lee started to offer a graduate course on life-writing at the University of York. As she put it mildly 'it was thought a rather peculiar thing to do then in an academic context.'¹⁸ Without harping on a subject with which many self-avowed biographers are all too familiar, the genre was rarely accepted as a valid academic pursuit till very recently, and we owe its acceptance to the 'pioneers' (a term Lee applied to

¹⁴ Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, London, Vision and Barnes & Noble, 1981, p. 11.

¹⁵ Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1989, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁸ 'The Life Biographic: An Interview with Hermione Lee,' *op. cit.*

herself) who bravely proposed such courses and in two decades transformed the field into a flourishing discipline.

It is worth pondering for a moment on ‘Life-writing,’ the term used by Lee. She borrowed it from Virginia Woolf, who in her ‘Sketch of the past’ explored her childhood, and tried to portray herself as a ‘fish in a stream.’¹⁹ While Woolf found it impossible to describe the stream that surrounded her then—understand here family context, society, environment—she was aware of the influence of ‘invisible presences’ in her life, such as that of her prematurely deceased mother. The task of the biographer should be, according to her, to detect and explain these ‘presences’ in order to give a truthful account of the life of the subject. But to ‘Life-writing,’ Lee gives a broader meaning than Woolf, seeing it as a ‘useful term for this mixture of auto/biographical memoirs, satiric sketches, fictionalized or psychoanalytical quests, and investigations of how life-stories can be written.’²⁰ And, following in Woolf’s footsteps, she agrees that accounting for the fish and the stream should be the goal of biographies: ‘What interests me more than anything is this complicated negotiation between the life that’s been led or being led and the memory of a past bit of one’s life, and the way in which it gets turned into something else, *performed*.’²¹ And she makes a clear distinction between the role of the critic and that of the biographer: ‘not to collapse the work back into the life’ is her motto, though she acknowledges, ‘I can’t see the point of writing about someone whose work I don’t admire.’²²

Admiration is undoubtedly what she feels for the work of Virginia Woolf. The author of *The Waves* has been an inspiration, the starting point of most of her reflections on literature since she first read her books. But when asked by a publisher if she would write a biography of her obviously favoured writer, she first of all refused: ‘I thought it was ridiculous,’ she explained. Fortunately for her readers, she was approached again: ‘At that point, I thought, Clearly, people feel it’s the right time to have a new biography of Virginia Woolf, and clearly, more than one person thinks I should be the one to do it.’²³

Once she overcame her feelings of apprehension, she started to tackle the mass of writings and archives. ‘Her remains are fearsome,’ she wrote, ‘Periodic attacks of archive faintness overcame me, as I contemplated the transatlantically scattered hoards of manuscripts and letters, diaries and notebooks, which would allow a really uncompromising biographer to make a record of what Virginia Woolf said, felt, did and write on almost every day of her life.’²⁴

To these *remains*, critical works and witness accounts had to be added. About the latter, Lee felt ambivalent: ‘They have been telling their Virginia Woolf stories for over fifty years, mostly committed to paper and hardened into irrefragible forms. I often felt, as I went on my well-trodden rounds (to be met, on the whole, with kind but wearied civility) how impertinent it was to reduce other people’s long histories to their moments of

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being. A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, Jeanne Schulkind (ed.), 2nd edition, New York, Harvest Book, 1985, p. 80.

²⁰ Hermione Lee, *Biography. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 73.

²¹ ‘The Life Biographic: An Interview with Hermione Lee,’ *op. cit.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Paris Review*, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Virginia Woolf*, *op. cit.*, p. 3-4.

knowledge of this one famous person, as though the rest of their lives counted for nothing.²⁵

Her conscientious approach led to filling some gaps in Woolf's life, as there are always questions that haven't been asked: 'about the fourth or fifth time I went to see Quentin Bell and Anne Olivier Bell, we were sitting at the kitchen table, and I said, 'Where are Thoby's letters?' And Olivier said, 'They're in the attic.' And only then did she show them to me. She was waiting to see if I would notice the gap before I earned the right to see them.' A discovery far from being anecdotal if we remember the importance of Thoby in Virginia and Vanessa's lives, and the profound despair his premature death caused.

Sitting down in 1991 to figure out how to approach the actual writing of the biography, Lee noted in her research notebook: 'It's all about structure.'²⁶ And all (or almost all) about it, it would be. Leaving behind the strict cradle-to-grave approach, she wove Woolf's life into thematic chapters ordered within four large chronological periods. With those transversal forays, the biographer gives her reader tools to understand her subject earlier than any chronological approach would allow. For example, the first period, '1882-1902,' ends on 'Madness': the chapter presents Woolf's psychiatric history, from the early manifestation of the illness through the diagnoses and the medical recommendations that would govern the writer's life till her death. And eager to leave any ambiguity behind, Lee clearly states her position in the first lines of that chapter:

Virginia Woolf was a sane woman who had an illness. She was often a patient, but she was not a victim. She was not weak, or hysterical, or self-deluding, or guilty, or oppressed. On the contrary, she was a person of exceptional courage, intelligence, and stoicism, who made the best use she could, and came to the deepest understanding possible to her, of her own condition. She endured, periodically, great agony of mind and severe physical pain, with remarkably little self-pity.²⁷

In a context where Woolf's mental health is still to this day an object of contention between critics, and a battleground among feminists, it takes courage to assert clearly such a position and to steer a biography from that angle. And free from the guessing game—over the symptoms and nature of the illness—the reader is now able to look at the writer at work with an empathy that could only come from knowledge.

This is not a common practice among biographers, and it gets me back to a point I made earlier: unlike most in her field, Lee does not strive to make her reader think she is 'objective,' or that she holds the 'truth' about her subject, and she makes her presence and her voice obvious. And as if she wanted no one to forget it, after opening *Virginia Woolf* with 'Biography,' she closes it with 'Biographer,' an intimate reflection in the first person on her writing journey, far from the impersonal tone traditionally used by biographers. In the last lines, recalling a visit to Talland House in Saint Ives, where Woolf spent her childhood summers, one can hear how she seals her voice in the writing. 'I stand in the garden, feeling like a biographer, a tourist, and an intruder,' she writes, uncertain of her right to be there, not because the actual owners or the house are tired of being a pilgrimage

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 759.

²⁶ *Paris Review*, *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Virginia Woolf*, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

destination, but because of the intimate feeling the view from it gives her: 'I can allow myself to suppose that I am seeing something of what she saw. My view overlays with, just touches, hers. The view, in fact, seems to have been written by Virginia Woolf. The lighthouse beam strikes round; the waves break on the shore.'²⁸

Two years after the publication of her remarkable tome, thirty years after she graduated from the university, Lee was back in Oxford, as the Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature. Her inaugural lecture, boldly entitled 'Reading in Bed,' focused on the 'female solitary reader.' Her intent was 'to explore the inner experience of women writers as readers and to look at the solitary space of reading which for many women writers has embodied one of the most formative pleasures of their lives.'²⁹ The illicit in the women's act of reading, the struggle for the right to read, the dubiousness with which people look at a young female reader, is, she noticed, most often described 'as a secret experience intensely embodied and couched in a highly physical language.' An intensity reflected in the fact that 'the formative act of reading, carried out both in response to and in opposition to the life of the family, was for a large number of women one of the most crucial and determining features of their early lives.'³⁰

Her very feminist approach here is a reflection of her own life experience as a girl who with her mother's encouragement, as we've seen, read her way through childhood into adulthood, and became a successful professional. She was the first woman to hold the Goldsmiths' Chair, and she became the first woman president of Wolfson College. Her gratitude goes to the women who, through centuries of struggles, gave her the possibility of pursuing her career and writing dreams: 'I suppose that is where my feminism lies—to have reached a certain level in my profession in this country by writing and teaching, and to have benefitted from the strenuous labours of my female predecessors going back to the 1920's.'³¹

And in spite of her very respectable position at the university, she never forgets that it is sometimes necessary to take some revenge on history with simple—but highly symbolic—gestures:

At New College there is a square quadrangle with a round lawn at its centre. You're not allowed to walk across the grass if you're not a Fellow of New College, and most people don't walk across the grass anyway because it's not good for it. But I made a point, whenever I was crossing that quad, of walking across the grass, and every single time I did, I thought of Virginia Woolf and the part of *A Room of One's Own* where she describes being waved away from the college grass and the library by the beadle because women weren't allowed. But I had the right to be there.³²

While she is an open feminist, she does not see however her choice of writing mostly about

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 761.

²⁹ *Reading in Bed*, Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 21 October 1999 by Hermione Lee, Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³¹ *Paris Review*, *op. cit.*

³² *Ibid.*

women as a statement, insisting that she chooses her subjects for traits that are not gender specific: 'I'm attracted by subjects who are individualistic, who don't like joining movements, who have carved out their own ways, who have remarkable minds, and whose marriages or partnerships, when they work well, work as forms of companionship.'³³ A divorced woman of independent means, who adopted France as her home country and found there happiness in writing and literary companionships, Edith Wharton, subject of her fourth biography, fits that description. And again, mapping out her work, Lee asked herself the structural question. What she had done with Woolf would not do here: 'With Wharton I had a different idea, which also tried to be in sympathy with the texture of her life. I wanted the book to be like a series of very richly furnished rooms. So you would go into the Henry James room, or the Italy room, or the dark room of France at war. It was all done with the utmost thickness and richness and density.'³⁴

'I start from a position of profound admiration for the work. But it's a mistake, in my view, to be sentimental. Writing a biography is not a love affair. It's not a marriage. It's a job, it's a piece of work,' she writes, acknowledging that she was not attracted at first to Wharton as a person, but as she worked, her admiration grew page after page for this woman, born into the most privileged circles but who brought herself to be a major voice of American letters. This confession makes the end of the volume even more poignant: Lee, as she had done with Woolf, ends the writing with an ultimate pilgrimage. For Woolf it was the happy place of childhood, for Wharton, it is her grave, in the Cimetière des Gonards, a small cemetery close to Versailles. There the author of *Ethan Frome* was reunited in death with her life partner Walter Berry, whose grave is only steps away from hers. In the first pages of the biography, Lee had written: 'Whenever Wharton writes about the decoration of houses, she is writing about behaviours and beliefs.'³⁵ An idea she has not forgotten when she stands in front of the writer's stele:

A cotoneaster had been planted in the earth frame around the stone, but the tomb was covered with weeds, old bottles and a very ancient pot of dead flowers. Clearly no one had been there for a long time. It struck me as an unvisited and lonely tomb, of a person who died without close relatives nearby to look after it, the casualty of a disputed will. [...] In the rain, I weeded Edith, and planted a single white silk azalea, bought from the flower-shop at the cemetery gate. She would probably have been scornful about the artificial flower, but would, I felt, have been glad to have her grave tidied up.³⁶

As she was about to inaugurate what would quickly become one of, if not *the* leading Anglophone research cluster on life-writing, Hermione Lee was asked to contribute a volume to the 'Very Short Introduction' series published by Oxford University Press. In a hundred and forty pages she was to give an overview of the art of biography through the centuries. Faced with this daunting task, she chose to limit her corpus to the British

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Edith Wharton*, New York, Vintage books, 2007, p. 28.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 762.

tradition, to examine the ‘recurrent questions’ of biographical writing: ‘definition, value, and purpose,’³⁷ and to compile playfully these ‘Ten rules for biography’:

- 1— The story should be true
- 2— the story should cover the whole life
- 3— nothing should be omitted or concealed
- 4— all sources used should be identified
- 5— the biographer should know the subject
- 6— the biographer should be objective
- 7— biography is a form of history
- 8— biography is an investigation of identity
- 9— the story should have some value for the reader
- 10— there is no rule for biography.³⁸

Her comments on each tell us more about her own ‘art of biography,’ how she believes for example that while biographers should not censor themselves or idealize their subject (third rule), it is essential to build a narrative, which is a ‘process of choice.’³⁹ She reminds us with her fourth rule that ‘biography is not a free zone,’ and has a code of ethics. She took the fifth one from Boswell, who believed that one should not write about somebody one has never met; as she gently puts it, it is ‘not so now,’ adding prophetically: ‘The biographer who is asked to write the Life by the subject or by the subject’s relations may find the authorization a heavy burden.’⁴⁰ And the rule she might apply consistently to her work is the tenth one. For each biography she has written thus far, she has created a new structure, a new writing approach in agreement with the personality of her subject, finding what she called the ‘key word’⁴¹ of that life and drawing accordingly a path to follow.

When Penelope Fitzgerald wrote an appreciative review of *Virginia Woolf* she could not guess that twelve years later her children would ask Hermione Lee to write her biography⁴². The two women met a few times, but even when Lee asked more pointed questions during a visit at her house in Bishops Road, London, Fitzgerald never revealed much of her life or personal thoughts:

My attempts to elicit her life story and the secrets of her writing life were met, politely and affably, with well-trodden phrases from other interviews, short bursts of excitement and interest, enthusiastic considerations of other writers, and evasive deflections masquerading as changes of subject, all in her light, clear, melodious voice, interspersed with laughter, sighs and very long pauses.⁴³

³⁷ *Biography. A Very Short Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6-18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴¹ Hermione Lee, *Body Parts. Essays on Life-Writing*, London, Pimlico-Random House, 2008, p. 80.

⁴² Penelope Fitzgerald, ‘A biography of one’s own,’ *Prospect*, 20 October 1996, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-L/Pand-books/virginia-woolf-letters-biography>.

⁴³ *Penelope Fitzgerald. A Life*, New York, Vintage books, 2014, p. 422.

Confronted with the situation she feared in her fifth rule for biography, she observed first-hand that agreeing to write an 'authorized' biography presented 'its own set of interesting complications.'⁴⁴ On one hand she was living 'a biographer's dream': 'There are boxes, shelves and drawers-full of photograph albums, family documents, fragments of early drafts much crossed out and scribbled over, fascinating plot summaries and sketches for stories and novels that never came to fruition, research notes for an unwritten biography of her friend L.P. Hartley and everything from birthday cards and bills to invitations and vaccination certificates.'⁴⁵ On the other hand, she had to keep in mind that her first readers were to be people emotionally invested in that life...

The reader does not get at any point the feeling that the family actually hampered the biographer's work. Lee's portrait of Penelope Fitzgerald presents many of the characteristics found in Wharton's or Woolf's. She paints a woman who loved to read, who took all of her jobs, wife, mother, teacher and finally writer very seriously, and while she recounted accurately the first sixty decades of Fitzgerald's life, her goal is to show a woman at work, a woman who was finally able at sixty to sit down and write the novels she had been thinking about all along. And the novels present their own challenge, as 'she wrote about her own life, but kept herself carefully concealed.'⁴⁶ So even if Lee was granted full access to the archives and the family, many areas of the life remained obscure:

I am acutely aware of two things. One is the enormous amount of work she did, and then compressed, for every book she wrote. The other is the speaking presence of the gaps and silences left in the metaphorical creases between the pages I am reading. There are many things she did not want anyone to know about her, and which no one will ever know. I find this frustrating, amusing, seductive and admirable.⁴⁷

Admiration (for the woman, for the work) seem to be the key word of this biography, written because of Lee's 'curiosity about her life and a belief in her genius.'⁴⁸

Writing the life of Penelope Fitzgerald, Hermione Lee was particularly touched by her research in the writer's personal library:

The family archive contains many of Fitzgerald's books. I wrote that sentence as flatly as I could, but in fact it makes my biographer's pulse race wildly. This is the second time in my life I have been given access to such an extraordinary source of knowledge about my subject. [...] they are the battered, treasured, much-used library of a working woman, mostly paperbacks, stuffed full of notes, marks, clippings and reviews, written all over from cover to cover in Fitzgerald's clear, steady, italic handwriting. [...] they provide the entry point to a remarkable writer's reading life.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ 'The Life Biographic: An Interview with Hermione Lee,' *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ 'From the margins: Hermione Lee on Penelope Fitzgerald,' *The Guardian*, 2 April 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/apr/03/hermione-lee-penelope-fitzgerald>.

⁴⁶ *Penelope Fitzgerald, op. cit.*, p. XV.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. XVI.

⁴⁹ 'From the margins: Hermione Lee on Penelope Fitzgerald,' *op. cit.*

And what other point of entry would a literary biographer wish for? I would love to explore Hermione Lee's library, make an inventory of her inspirations, of her favourite reads, of the volumes she keeps by her desk, the ones she relegates to a remote room of the house. This would provide far more insight into the working life of the biographer and the critic than most archives could.

A 'quite private person,' Hermione Lee has become over the years a public figure. While my goal is to shed light on her work and encourage readers to look at it as an *oeuvre*, just like that of an established novelist, I took up the challenge of excavating some personal titbits. In my own practice as a biographer, I like to set writing constraints (once, for example, I have decided I would only quote my subject, none of their critics or contemporaries); here, since I certainly did not want to invade her privacy, I decided to limit my explorations to published accounts. The long interview Lee gave to the *Paris Review* is the source of most information on her childhood and education, while the interview by Urvashi Vashist reveals quite a bit of her professional life. Then there are the paratexts, thresholds to the book, such as dedications and acknowledgements that help map out the network, personal and professional, surrounding an author. In Lee's case, all of her books except two⁵⁰ are dedicated to John Barnard, her husband. They met, as she recalled in a tribute to Ernest Hofer, friend and mentor to the couple, 'on the Trinity Summer School in 1975. John had been teaching on the Summer School since 1967, from its early days in St. Hilda's, and I taught on it in the mid-70's, the time when my U. Mass. students were telling me to read *The Golden Notebook* as it would change my life, the time when England's hottest summer for many years, in 1976, was bleaching the lawns of Trinity to a yellowish-white.' They never had any children together, but Barnard has children from a previous marriage, who when they were young spent time with them both. It is when remembering one of Hofer's visits that she paints this very domestic scene:

[...] my most treasured memory of our old friend dates from thirty years ago, when he came to visit us in John's house on the moors in Yorkshire. We woke up in the morning to hear peals of laughter coming from the children's room at the end of the corridor. Ernest was sitting in his dressing-gown, perched on an old wooden chair, chattering away to John's children, who were watching this fabulous apparition with enchanted amazement, as he entertained them with the same kind of glee, style and wit he would have shown to a poet or a princess.⁵¹

At several occasions, during a conference I attended at Wolfson in 2013, she referred publicly to Barnard and hinted at their complicity and his full support of her career. Now that Barnard is retired, they live in Oxford, in a house owned by the college, and escape to write and rest in their Yorkshire house on every occasion they get:

We go to a ramshackle old house, where you can just walk out of the house into the countryside. We will get up not too late, and we will have breakfast and we will both go to our

⁵⁰ *Biography. A Very Short Introduction* is dedicated to her friend and at times editor, Jenny Uglow, and *Body Parts* to Josephine Lee, her mother.

⁵¹ 'Ernest Hofer remembered by Hermione Lee, with John Barnard,' August 2008, <http://www.friendsofErnest.org/lee.html>.

desks and all day long, until about three o'clock in the afternoon, I will write my book, and then in the afternoon we will go for a walk. Then we'll make supper, and then I'll probably do a bit more writing in the evening. That is my writing day in the country. It's very quiet and very concentrated. It's the opposite of life at Wolfson College, which is chock-full of people and meetings and committees and events and decision making.⁵²

Even though she admitted to being ruthless in her practice of biography⁵³, Lee has trouble with the idea of becoming herself the subject of a biographical work. Her name has appeared here and there in biographies of friends or acquaintances, and she did not relish the experience, to say the least. In this reversal of roles, these narratives made her still more aware of the dangers of the genre:

My first experience of being on the receiving end of this was to read, in a biography of my friend the novelist Brian Moore, that I and my husband got lost on our way to visit Brian and Jean Moore at their remote house in Nova Scotia in the mid-1990's, and had to spend the night in a hotel. No such thing happened, and—although this 'fact' didn't have the slightest bearing on Brian Moore's story, except as a useful way of describing how out-of-the-way his house was—I felt a twinge of outrage and bafflement on reading it, as though a tiny part of my life had been for ever traduced.⁵⁴

To explain her dedication to the genre, Lee said to one of her interviewers that 'one of the motives of biographies is to protect disappearing species.' She was there referring to writers such as Penelope Fitzgerald who, after her moment of glory, has disappeared from the literary spotlight though her work is as influential now as it was at publication. Lee recalls numerous occasions when in response to her saying she was writing a biography of Fitzgerald, she got a sheepish 'I'm terribly sorry, but I don't know who she is,' while working on Woolf she got only appreciative and interested comments... Biographers suffer a similar fate: they are often remembered because of their work on a well-known author, and rare are the readers who are aware of their whole body of work and of the importance of that work for the field. And when biographies of biographers will appear, we will know that the genre has come full circle, and life-writers will by then have become, simply, writers.

⁵² *Paris Review*, *op. cit.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Body Parts*, *op. cit.*, p. 28-29.