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Biography and history have had a fraught relationship, although as Malcom Allbrook and Melanie Nolan note in the first issue of the new *Australian Journal of Biography and History* published at the end of 2018, there has been “a revival in interest among academic historians at the end of the twentieth century in Australia and beyond” (2018, p4). Daniel Meister makes a case for what he calls Historical Biography, arguing that it could “chart a middle course” between classical biography, which foregrounds the life, and histories that use biographical subjects to ‘humanise’ their study of a time or era. He argues “Historical Biography should alternate its gaze between the subject and their context, exploring ways in which they interact” (2017, 5) but goes on to state that the approach “does not require its own theorising, for when trained historians write works of Historical Biography, they bring to task whatever theoretical approach (about society, not biography) they find most convincing and beneficial” (2017, p6). Meister seems to align with Klauss van Berkel’s assertion that **SLIDE** “biography has no method, but is a method” (van Berkel, 1996, 9). **SLIDE** Yet no elaboration on what this method looks like is provided. Renders and de Hann define biography as

the study of the life of an individual, based on the methods of historical scholarship, with the goal of illuminating what is public, explained and interpreted in part from the perspective of the personal. The personal is in this respect an important source, but not a determining one. The researcher remains in control of his subject and will critically judge the value of autobiographical material, such as letters, journals and memoirs, just as he would with other sources, and will deviate from them to the extent that he considers them to be unreliable. (2014, p2)

While this gives us some sense of an approach **SLIDE** “based on methods of historical scholarship” it still is ill-defined. I argue that what many of these scholars, who are both historians and biographers, are arguing for is the methodology of contextual biography. This term avoids positioning biography as a sub-field of history in the way Meisters “Historical Biography” does, yet acknowledged the significance of historical context in the study of any life.

While the term contextual biography has been in use for some time, it remains poorly defined and rarely explained at length. Two notable contextual biographies highlight the lack of clarity about the methodology. **SLIDE** In *James Joyce in Context* (2009), John McCourt states that a study of the broader context of an author allows us “to see him [the subject] as both the product of and interested participant in a whole variety of worlds which provide the contexts and co-texts of his fictional output” (xv). This is an excellent summation of the scope of contextual biography, however, McCourt’s collection of essays goes on to focus on one context at a time, not really considering the intrinsic connectedness of this “variety of worlds”. It is a contextual biography in that many facets of the subject’s life are considered as being shaped by the multiple contexts in which Joyce lived and wrote—his Irish heritage and

youth, the European context of his adult life, and the British world in which his writings were circulated—yet it does not ultimately achieve a holistic image of its subject. In some respects, McCourt’s study of these multiple contexts also leads to a picture of a deeply fragmented life in writing, and an equally fragmented critical heritage to which these contexts give rise.

Another successful contextual biography is James Shapiro’s *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. Shapiro observes the relationship between text and context that can be seen through contextual biography: “it is no more possible to talk about Shakespeare’s plays independently of his age than it is to grasp what his society went through without the benefit of Shakespeare’s insights” (2005, xvii). This then is a defining feature of contextual biography: it is not only a study of the “variety of worlds” that shaped the author’s works, but how these works in turn shaped the discourses of which they become a part. The benefit in taking the wide angle view offered by contextual biography resides in allowing an impression of the subject as a whole, rather than just a small fragment of their life. In doing so, we can trace the impact of culture upon the author and vice versa in a way that is not possible in other biographical approaches.

Turning to literary criticism for a definition of contextual biography offers little more clarity. **SLIDE** One such example is the half-page devoted to contextual biography by Ira Nadel in *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*; an introduction to the field of biographical writing. Nadel states,

in examining the life with the work in its social/historical context, the biography provides a broader vision and greater breadth to the subject while expanding the nature of the genre. Contextual biography incorporates the concern of group biography with the social aspects of psychobiography creating a form that enlarges the foundations of biographical writing ... contextual biography redresses the emphasis on chronology to one of totality. (1986, 200)

This is a sound outline of the scope of contextual biography, but does not go on to consider the weight that should be given to various components of context or clearly describe a methodology. Indeed, there is no easily located comprehensive scholarly work that offers a clear definition of contextual biography. The most frequently cited paper is Fernando Vidal's 2003 offering, "Contextual Biography and the Evolving Systems Approach to Creativity", which summarises the key elements of a contextual biography: **SLIDE**

First, the individual is considered as an evolving system structured as a network of intellectual and existential projects. Writing a biography implies tracing and reconstructing such a network. The network image emphasizes the nonlinear nature of an individual life and highlights the interaction between the different dimensions of existence. Second, different conceptual levels are distinguished: the internal environments that regulate the subject's activity "from the inside"..., the immediate environments involved in the processes of socialization and individuation, and the distant contexts (history) ... Third, the subject of the biography is attributed an intrinsic and existential psychology. His productions are not seen as the manifestation of some underlying essence, but rather as part of the construction of a mental universe. (2003, 81)

In summary, Vidal is looking at the works of the subject, their socio-historical place, and the author's personal response or approach to this. This is similar to Nadel's identification of "group biography with the social aspects of psychobiography" (1986, 200).

It is important to note Nadel's emphasis on "totality". This an academic long shot of the subject, where we can see the discursive landscape in which they stand and where the subject fits within it. Yet we must keep in mind that this is not a two-dimensional picture. Context seen only as a colourful backdrop in an image of the subject undervalues the complex interplay between the subject's life and the world in which they lived and worked.

Rather, we must imagine the subject constructed through a contextual biography to be multidimensional; we see the author as a part of their context and so can begin to see the interplay between the subject and their world: how they interacted and reacted to their context both in life and works, how they were acted upon by others, and how their works acted to change the context of the culture of which they were a part. In seeing the biographical subject *in situ*, contextual biography allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the subject, not only as an individual, but as an integral and active part of the culture in which they lived.

While we build this richer image, we must keep in mind the great trap of biography: the feeling that we can come to “know” our subject. For example, while Vidal provides some important points for consideration, the study continues to place significant emphasis on the internal processes of the biographical subject, which are difficult to definitively establish, even when evidence such as personal letters and diaries exist. If we approach contextual biography with this awareness of the dangers of assuming too much, Nadel and Vidal do offer some ideas about the potential key features of contextual biography as a methodology. These can be summarised as a study of the author’s socio-cultural place and time, their position within this landscape, and their responses (both private and published) to this, with the caveat that these personal responses must be supported by corroborating evidence and not merely represent the biographer’s assumptions or extrapolations.

This recognition of the complex interplay between a biographical subject’s personality, place, and time are useful in further defining the method of contextual biography. A study of personality aligns with more traditional styles of biography such as psychobiography and hagiography, with their emphasis on the first-hand experiences and thoughts of their subject. A study of the subject’s place within their society and culture draws upon cultural studies, tracing the ebbs and flows of discursive influence. Finally, a broad

view of the subject's time draws upon historiography, allowing the contextual biographer to trace the large forces shaping the subject's world, and to position them within the many voices of the time; what McCourt refers to as "co-texts" (2009, xv). Many biographies of literary figures draw on these fields, yet few consider all of them equally or holistically. In moving towards a definition of the methodology of contextual biography, the differing yet complementary perspectives offered by these more well-established research methodologies are useful in framing how we can build **SLIDE** a multidimensional image of the authorial subject as a person (biography) situated within a particular culture and society (cultural history), then begin to trace the forces that influenced them and, in turn, how they influenced their world (historiography).

The question that follows then is how do we study these three areas and what weight do we give them? I argue that the answer, like any good research outcome, is to use evidence from the author's place and time, including the works, personal writings, and others' responses to them. Unlike openly speculative biographies, which present suppositions or assumptions about the author's state of mind or feelings derived from their works, contextual biography must set a higher standard, drawing from the discipline of history. Documentary evidence must be given to support assertions linking events and the author's fictional works. This is most important when attempting to discuss the author's personal view or motivations. **SLIDE** In the case of Mary Shelley as an example, we are fortunate to have access to both her diaries and letters so we do have some evidence from which to draw conclusions, but this must be done with care, and with a constant eye to other contextual material that may shape our understanding of her work. Contextual biography must reach beyond the immediate to look at the cultural landscape of which the subject was a part. Newspaper articles, parliamentary discussions, scientific papers do not need to make reference to an author or their work to have relevance to a broader study of context. Studying this material allows

scholars to establish the tenor of the time—how the author felt about a topic, but also how many others felt and the ideas they expressed about such matters—and so situate their subject within this discursive landscape.

**SLIDE** As a methodology, then, contextual biography has the key pillars of:

- A survey of the cultural landscape or ‘pool’ of which the subject was a part. This includes both the discourses with which they directly engaged and more general trends in the era.
- Consideration of the subject’s personality and personal experiences, which must draw upon direct evidence, rather than emotive supposition.
- Reflection on how the author’s works drew upon the discourses identified, again with a reliance on the evidence available.
- Study of how the author’s works were received, and how this then reshaped the culture in which they lived. This final stage may be a part of a contextual biography, or be a standalone study, facilitated by the findings of a contextual biography.

**SLIDE** To use this framework, based upon Vidal’s suggestion of a study of the relationship between works, socio-historical place and personal responses, there is ample evidence for a contextual biography of Shelley. In terms of Shelley’s cultural landscape, she lived at a time of significant cultural change. Politically, the French Revolution had occurred only 27 years before, the Greek Revolution would be a major concern of her and her circle and questions about the future of England were ever-present. The Scientific Revolution that had begun in the 1700s continued to lay the foundations of the modern science of today. Public demonstrations and dissections were commonplace and Shelley attended at least 2 of these demonstrations. Shelley was concerned with and drew upon many of the ideas prevalent amongst her Romantic milieu, including sublime natural imagery in her writing.

**SLIDE** In terms of Shelley's personal experience of this cultural landscape, we are fortunate to have access to all of Shelley's works. Extensive personal writing in the form of diaries and letters are also available through the Abinger Collection, which gives insight into Shelley's thoughts and feelings on various issues. We are also fortunate to have direct evidence of what the Shelleys were reading, and so what ideas and discourses they were engaged with, since they kept a list of what they were reading as a part of their shared journals. Additionally, a large amount of correspondence from members of their social circle is also available, as further evidence of the ideas that their circle pursued. Her diaries and letters provide insight into the relationships she had with the important people in her life: her father, the philosopher William Godwin, her mother, who died in childbirth, Mary Wolstonecraft, her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley and their close friend Lord Byron. Shelley's personal story is characterised by loss – her mother, her husband aged 22, and 3 of her 4 children all died before she was 30. Many biographers have made much of this, using psychoanalysis to ascribe the Creature in *Frankenstein* as a manifestation of Shelley's fear of motherhood, for example. Yet they often neglect to mention the novel was largely complete before Percy and the children died. The broader scope of contextual biography helps us better frame Shelley's personal experience and so not resort to diagnoses at 200 years distance.

**SLIDE** Consideration of all of these factors offers an understanding of the conditions of and influences upon the creation of Shelley's works, and allows us to see her as an active agent in the multidimensional space she occupied. How did these socio-cultural trends and personal experiences then shape Shelley's agency as a writer? The link to the new science of the era is evident, as Shelley uses the idea that bodies could be reanimated, as was implied in Galvanic demonstrations, as the premise of her story. The story is often categorised (I would argue inaccurately) as a Gothic novel, with its emphasis on sublime, remote and isolated landscapes and a brooding and deeply troubled male protagonist. Yet there is also something new which

Shelley's novel introduced into Romantic culture – an ambiguous ending where neither the Creature or the creator is condemned – it is left to the reader to make a moral judgement. I argue this new moralising space that is explored through fiction is Shelley's real legacy and the underpinning discourse of what would come to be called the science fiction genre.

**SLIDE** We can step back and survey not only the impact Shelley's novel had upon her culture, but how it continues to shape our own. The idea of Frankenstein and his Creature was quickly absorbed into the Zeitgeist, and adopted and adapted in a variety of ways.

**SLIDE** I would argue, as Laurie Johnson does in his brief study of the evolution of the video game industry from both much older histories of key technological innovations and more immediate cultural, industrial, and even personal contexts, that we must “attempt to set up some parameters for mapping what we might call the fields of influence, which at key historical moments (or milestones) create the possibility for an individual act or product to achieve widespread or long-term cultural impact” (2007, 177). These “fields of influence” can now be seen using tools such as Google's NGram viewer. **SLIDE** This tool searches digitised texts for key words, which show frequency of use. In the case of “Frankenstein”, the Ngram viewer provides stark visual evidence of the uptake of Shelley's core imagery. While a relatively blunt instrument, a more refined version, Davies' Advanced Interface, allows scholars to not only see the frequency of word use, but also access the material in which it was used, allowing researchers to quickly build an understanding of not only the frequency but the impact key terminology was having on the cultural pool of both the author's time and how these ripples of influence continue to spread today.

Working towards a clearer articulation of the methodology of contextual biography strengthens the analysis of Shelley's position as more significant than currently recognised by literary scholars. Understanding her personal experiences in relation to the world around her and, in turn, how her works reflect and respond to the broader social and discursive context in



which they were written allow us to evaluate not only the meaning of the text but its significance within its society and ongoing impact in the world today.

Foucault's conception of society and culture through the language of archaeology and geology seems to support the evolutionary view of culture and change suggested by the cultural turn, as slow and sedimentary. Yet Foucault also acknowledges the ability of individuals to disrupt the slow evolution of culture with his theorisation of the role of the "founder of discourse". **SLIDE**

in the course of the nineteenth century, there appeared in Europe another, more uncommon, kind of author, whom one should confuse with neither the "great" literary authors, nor the authors of religious texts, nor the founders of science. In a somewhat arbitrary way we shall call those who belong in this last group "founders of discursivity". They are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts. (Foucault, *Author* 1984, 113-114)

I argue that Shelley is a Foucauldian founder of discourse—she renegotiated the values framework for the new science of her era. *Frankenstein's* creation is Shelley's reflection upon the potential of the new science of galvanism. Most significantly, she leaves the act of negotiation to the reader with the ambiguity of the ending, which condemns neither Victor nor the Creature. In this way we can see the role of the individual biographical subject within their broader cultural context as a potential agent of cultural change, or founder of discourse. Of course, not every author can be considered a founder of discourse, but the methodology of contextual biography provides a structure that allows us to trace the impact of the author-subject upon their culture, to measure their impact in a way not currently possible in other biographical approaches. While the cultural turn does place emphasis on the more slow-

moving forces of cultural change and continuity, contextual biography is a methodology that allows us to see the influence of the individual subject in culture and then, in turn, over time.

**SLIDE** Contextual biography is thus a hybrid methodology, drawing upon a range of disciplines in constructing an understanding of the subject within their place and time, without becoming a study of place and time in their own right. What is most important is the idea of the subject within their context: the human subject is at the centre of the work, but drawing upon other approaches provides a more complete understanding and not just an image of the complex interrelationships between the individual and the place and time in which they lived—we can see them as agents within their contextual landscape. I hope this reflection on the methodology and example of its application serves as a starting point for a better definition of contextual biography and its recognition as a methodology closely tied to the discipline of history, but with its own unique lens which focuses on the interplay between lives and their broader contexts.

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