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## **The Renaissance Portraits of Two Kings and One Cardinal<sup>1</sup>**

In his study on biography and portrait-painting, Richard Wendorf emphasises the documentary dimension of both forms which, according to his opinion, constitute “*attempts to capture – on paper or on canvas – what is lost or certain to fade*” (WENDORF 1991: 9). Approximately along the same line, Paul Murray Kendall states that “*the biographer’s object is ... to create a living picture*” (KENDALL 1965: 129) and Natalie Bober that “*The biographer is a portrait painter ... whose palette is words*” (BOBER 1991: 78).

The portraits here considered are precisely the product of word palettes handled by three authors who spanned the broad Renaissance period comprising Elizabeth I’s reign: Thomas More’s *Richard the Third*, Francis Bacon’s *Henry the Seventh* and George Cavendish’s *Wolsey*. The way these portraits were “*varnished, and framed*” (WILDE 1992: 35) and the inherent importance of their emblematic dimension – not accomplished through literal image, colour or iconographical detail, as in the famous portraits of Elizabeth, but through the rhetoric power of language – reveal important features for a complete understanding of the time, especially of the relations of power at several levels. In an age when lyric poetry and drama prevailed, this co-existent, less conspicuous form of narrative offers innumerable possibilities of apprehending the also innumerable and certainly complex faces that shaped the Renaissance in England.

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At a time when the word biography had not yet been coined, the written portraits were called *Lives* and contain such an abundance of puzzling elements that one is led to wonder about the characters created by the authors and the intentions they had to shape them in such a way.

Didacticism appears to have been intrinsic to biography since its beginnings in ancient Greece and its role has been repeatedly underlined in works on the genre. In *The Advancement of Learning*, Bacon states that when the life-lived of an individual exhibits “actions both trifling and important, great and small, public and private,” then the Life-written of that individual “if ... well and carefully written ... certainly contain[s] a more lively and faithful representation of things, and one which you may more safely and happily take for example in another case” (BACON 1860: 305).

Together with didacticism, *laudatio* and *vituperatio* constitute other striking elements of biography also detected right from its origins. Although the former stands out as apparently more prevalent, both shape the texts in one way or another and make them *exempla*, either to be imitated or to be exorcised. Concomitantly, there has been a permanent tendency to represent – on paper or on canvas – public, famous figures. More and Bacon tell us about two kings, whereas Cavendish writes about a cardinal who was a king’s minister, only second in power to the monarch. These eminent characters played a direct role in the historical process, detaching themselves from their anonymous contemporaries and constituting potential, ideal material to be approached, according to the tendency I have been focusing on. The texts, therefore, enclose a dimension of strict biography in the sense that, in principle, they are based on Richard Plantagenet, Henry Tudor and Thomas Wolsey but inevitably involve a dimension of historiography, in the

sense that they report – reliably or not – many factual occurrences: battles, marriage negotiations, diplomatic treaties.

The Renaissance concepts of history, literature, fiction and factual truth, as well as the authors' special involvement in their narratives are substantially different from those ones prevailing in the precedent and posterior ages, and are in part responsible for the textual peculiarities. As a matter of fact, what is told hardly corresponds to what is commonly known as biographical truth (ANDERSON 1984: 2), that essential condition required by the majority of the authors who have recently produced critical and theoretical essays on biography. Virginia Woolf's following words are particularly pertinent to the Renaissance biographical writings and to the universes they display: "*it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life*" (WOOLF 1967: 234). Speculation, imagination, fiction, unconfirmed and spurious data, personal opinions, all are clearly present in Tudor-Stuart *Lives*, and the writers are perfectly aware of their use. Thomas More frequently employs expressions such as "*It is for trouth reported*" (7/23),<sup>1</sup> "*as the fame runneth*" (7/26-27), "*as menne constantly say*" (16) "*this haue I by credible informacion learned*" (9/7) "*Thus say thei*" (55/26), "*men had it euer inwardely suspect*" (82/29) "*me thinketh it wer hard but it should be true*" (83/6-7); Bacon resorts to uncertain sources likewise: "*in the opinion of all men*", "*in the opinion of wise men*" (28/10-12), "*men of great understanding*" (28/15), "*secret rumours and whisperings*" (30/3) "*[they] were said to be destroyed*" (30/6), "*if it had been true*" (30/8); and Cavendish, although he develops his text around the illation "*Trewthe it ys*" (4/28), as if to justify a narrative which is almost entirely the product of his point of view, sometimes alludes to his own doubts and possible incapacity to reconstruct circumstances

or events: “*it semyd me ... that*”, “*I hard the oppynyon of Somme*” (75/22, 25), “*I wyll ... declare it as truly as it chaunced accordyng to my symple remembraunce*” (149/34, 150/1).

The essential paradigm of truth, continuously emphasised within the new concept of history as art and discipline, was apparently never defined, perhaps never practiced in its full extent. One may notice notorious incongruities in different reports by several historiographers on the same event, or, contrariwise, unanimous views by various writers who shared sources that were unreliable, due to the fact that they were based on orality or on spurious, badly preserved manuscripts.

One must also take into account the enormous pressure that particular historical context put on the writers. The then recent long conflict that opposed the rival factions of York and Lancaster houses exerted its vigorous influence on the English Renaissance. Its traces might have constituted a serious threat to the Tudors – ideological, in the sense of an everlasting tradition of ways of government and leadership; objective, in the sense that Yorks and Lancasters laid legitimate claims to the throne. New antagonisms had meanwhile arisen as a result of Reformation. The permanent clashes between Catholicism and Protestantism, Anglicanism and Puritanism, in an age characterised by tradition and change, certainly influenced historians, historiographers and every artist in general. On the other hand, the pressure was a result of complicated relations, involving factions, patronage and political power. On these uneven grounds, that Edward Bolton named “*places of danger*” (BOLTON 1908: 104-106), the official historians had no choice but to convey a certain kind of “truth” because they were usually confronted with the imposition of propaganda and submitted to censorship whenever they were hired to tell

the historic moments chosen by their patrons. For instance, Henry VII employed the Italian humanist Polydore Vergil to rewrite the history of England in a demolishing way for the York survivors. Thus started a long tradition of chronicles – Grafton’s, Hall’s, Holinshed’s – oriented by the same guideline: anti-York, pro-Tudor. Even those authors who stood in a more or less independent position were faced with the urgent need to avoid falling out of grace. Truth might surface, when it did not offend, disturb or threaten.

Centuries later and in totally different circumstances, Leo Strauss approached essential aspects that may be related to the Renaissance context. He refers to “*the effect of that compulsion, or persecution, on thoughts as well as actions*” (STRAUSS 1988: 22). This seems to assume a particular meaning along the Tudor dynasty, marked by Henry VII’s weak claim to the throne and by the dynastic/religious problems, from beginning to end. In the midst of the Elizabethan age, the complex issues of usurpation/deposition, power legitimacy/power investiture gave rise to opposite attitudes regarding two crucial, partly similar moments in the history of England: Henry VII’s victory and Richard III’s consequent destruction, physical and ideological, were amplified, giving consistency to the Tudor Myth; on the contrary, Henry IV’s ascending the throne and Richard II’s consequent deposition were considered topics to be avoided because of the parallels that would at once be drawn with the situation featuring Essex and Elizabeth.

Nevertheless, also according to Strauss, the authors have always the possibility of remaining independent in those “*places of danger*” should they employ a subtle technique while producing their works:

*Persecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines.*

(STRAUSS 1988: 25)

Strauss classifies the designation “*writing between the lines*” as metaphorical and the definition as literally impossible, although its roots stem from Antiquity, once the technique is intimately related with literary creation and imagination, thus with literary art, as defined by Aristotle and Sidney. According to Strauss, what seems to be relevant is the practice of the technique by many authors, avoiding situations of coercion, especially in the past:

*... one may wonder whether some of the greatest writers of the past have not adapted their literary technique to the requirements of persecution, by presenting their views on all the then crucial questions exclusively between the lines.* (STRAUSS 1988: 26)

We must always bear in mind that the characters and the universes of biography are not fictional. Therefore, the pertinent aspects detected by Strauss necessarily assume a wider dimension, once they may ultimately be connected with the way the authors reported public, official decisions, attitudes and behaviours.

*The History of King Richard the Third* (ca. 1514), *The History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh* (1622) and *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (1558)

disclose the whole complexity of the age, as well as the peculiarities of Renaissance biographical writings I have just pointed out.

Thomas More draws an acid, unlikely portrait of Richard III, based on speculation and rumour as the author himself recognises. The legendary dimension of the protagonist, who is turned into a true monster by More and placed beyond recall in the domain of malignity, accurately emphasises the narrative line – vituperation built upon a process of *amplificatio*. Richard's actions are dictated by his loathsome, morally distorted personality, establishing perfect correspondences between the physical and the inner traits. The king was turned into an *exemplum*, not to be followed, not to be imitated, according to a didactic and moralising principle. The whole text seems to be deliberately out of focus so that what is claimed to be the truth may be completely encapsulated. Factual reality, as well as the actions, dialogues and conflicts involving the historical characters are the product of the artist's craft, not of the historiographer's. Within such frame, the negative portrait of the last Plantagenet king of England might have led to a propaganda piece, focused, for example, on the Tudor salvation of the kingdom. However, this is not what actually happens. In fact, the incomplete narrative with its abrupt ending, together with the literal aversion to Richard III, may indeed reveal a strong feeling of disappointment concerning an ideal of government and an auspicious era that soon proved to be characterised by new ways of tyranny, instability and corruption. The panegyric tendency that, more or less explicitly, has been associated to biographical writings is here therefore completely subverted.

In Francis Bacon's text *laudatio* does exist but is achieved in inconsistent ways, traced out by the exhaustive repetition of the conjunctions “yet” and “but”, and originated

by the permanent censure of the king. The author seems constantly divided between two sorts of obligations – to praise and to be true to a pseudo-factual reality. Henry VII's *Life* proves to be, above all, the report of his reign, namely of the state affairs and the monarch's policy. A sort of close up of the protagonist is made only at the end, occupies but a few pages and contains the major elements of the laudatory process, which does not mean that criticism is absent. The result is a composite image where the negative features invariably prevail. In fact, Bacon's attitude regarding the king is always ambivalent, sometimes even caustic, based on various reiterations that constantly emphasise a disturbing illation – Henry Tudor's ascending the throne was only made legitimate when he married a York, which corrosively presupposes the illegitimacy of his own, alleged titles. Furthermore, and reinforcing that same illation, many of his decisions are considered dubious and the cause of disastrous events by means of constant references to Henry's misjudgements, rapacity, unjust treatment of his queen and, chiefly, to the lack of preparation and experience for government. Therefore, while his life-lived may not be taken as an *exemplum*, the *Life* told by Bacon may constitute a didactic sample, as far as it reports a long learning process of someone in principle unfit to rule, and as far as it is a new approach to the man and the reign.

George Cavendish's purpose is to restore Wolsey's image and reputation that had been made insidious by other writers, within a whole set of injustices mainly inflicted by Anne Boleyn. Simultaneously, the apology contains an elaborate euphemistic process that gradually depicts Henry VIII as the master agent of his minister's opprobrium. The *Life* is then clearly apologetic and laudatory, exploring the cardinal's dimension as a victim to the least detail, and developed upon many dichotomies, originated precisely by the two

literal, antithetical moments in Wolsey's life-lived – his rise and fall. When compared with the other two, this portrait is doubtless the most direct, the one where the protagonist has more visibility. While reporting the ascendant motion of the Wheel of Fortune, the text contains many lively descriptions, full of colour and detail that correspond to powerful metonymies of the cardinal's extreme ostentation, opulence and wealth; while reporting the opposite movement, the author expands countless variations of the character's victimisation, as well as subtle, bitter considerations on the precariousness of power, on the inexorability of destiny and on the places of danger originated by factions, ambitions and despotism.

The ways the three authors approached their subjects are particularly elaborate. Fiction is merged with historical truth and the result is a totality of lives-lived and *Lives-written* where the authors' own lives are simultaneously and explicitly visible. Biographical truth and biographical fiction are thus convergent and confusable, because the texts absorb elements from what was then believed to be the objective truth and the creative imagination. The metaphorical processes give origin to complex meanings, and one must really try to read them "*between the lines*". The authors must have been exceptionally aware of the tensions that characterised their time, due to the places they occupied and to the themes they chose to deal with. The truth which is transmitted by More, Bacon and Cavendish corresponds therefore to a very special kind of truth or, perhaps, to many kinds of truth. As for propaganda, if it exists at all, it is certainly concealed under innumerable subtleties. For all these reasons, the three texts seem to be above all didactic, therefore useful, containing broad considerations on universal, timeless topics that are usually conveyed through moralising warnings. All of them end

up by focusing on forms of tyranny and injustice and, in one way or another, share a common concern, not exempted from disenchantment, because they insinuate the improbability of successful alternative solutions. As More powerfully put it in his *Richard III*,

*... these matters bee Kynges games, as it were stage playes, and  
for the more part plaied vpon scaffoldes. In which pore men be but  
y<sup>e</sup> lokers on. And thei y<sup>t</sup> wise be, wil medle no farther. (81/6-9)*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The numbers correspond to the page and line(s), respectively, of the works by Thomas More, Francis Bacon and George Cavendish, cited as Primary Sources.

<sup>2</sup> According to Judith Anderson's terminology: the author considers the difference between 'Life' and 'life': the first is written and the second is lived.

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