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## **“Fact-Fiction” as an Epistolary Forming Component of the Novel by B. Bainbridge “According to Queeney”**

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*In this article the correlation between fictional and documentary origins in the novel “According to Queeney” by Beryl Bainbridge is analysed. This novel belongs to the genre of biographical novel. The researcher analyses the peculiarities of this correlation in epistolary part of novel, which occupies one of the main parts in the narrative texture of the novel. Bainbridge, describing the life of the character, relies on authentic facts, and herewith interprets them according to her vision.*

*Keywords: contemporary British literature, biographical novel, fact, fiction, non fiction, faction, letter(s), a variety of interpretation, S. Johnson, B. Bainbridge.*

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### **Point**

The correlation between fact and fiction in a literary work is one of the topical problems of modern literary criticism, both in Russia and western countries.

For modern literature, especially English one, the process of substitution of the literature by fact-fiction literature is typical. There are several reasons for it and in this article we will name only some of them. A. Livergant believes that “nowadays the fact appears more fascinating than something existing in the imagination ..., fiction is perceived by many as rather “frivolous”, light-minded, and entertaining occupation than important and responsible one as it has been considered before” (Livergant, 2008).

*Professor Marina Balina, Illinois Wesleyan University, USA* explains the increased interest to “the fact literature” by “postmodernism influence that helped this literature to become independent from a well-known linearity of the narration, the “patchy” nature of the memory ... reflects the modern survival with its instability and fragmentariness in the best possible way. <...> the freedom of new literary memoirs, its accessibility to adjacent genres (philological research, essay, review, anecdote, and travel sketch) gives huge possibilities for any literary experiment” (Balina, 2003).

The introduction of letters in a novel or the creation of a novel in the form of correspondence becomes especially popular

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in the 18<sup>th</sup> – the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries “...in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was a world in which personal communication, both private and public, aristocratic and low, was a diligently cultivated activity. A world in which paper and pen, calligraphy, letters and signs of punctuation carried a huge emotional load, and displayed, to those who could read them well, an immense reservoir of hidden aspirations and memories, bodily pleasures, and subconscious ghosts”, – Professor Pia Brînzeu, University of *Timișoara*, Romania tells in the book review of “Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture” (2006) by Clare Brant (Brînzeu, 2009).

Classical epistolary novels were written by S. Richardson, J-J. Russo, etc.

“The epistolary form of a novel ... reflects the initial but very important stage in the development of the genre form. The shift from fact to fiction begins with the record of events and incidents” (Solovieva, 2008).

In the known glossaries, both Russian and English, the fact is based on a real event or phenomena; the fiction is usually based on something imaginary, fictitious.<sup>1</sup> These are two key notions and definitions for this article.

N.A. Bugrina singles out four types of fiction: 1) imagery, i.e. the use of vivid language to represent an object, action or idea and create an image: the biographer creates not events or facts, but that environment in which these events and facts exist, that is actually the art fabric of the novel; the author can imagine surroundings, landscape, location, he can change the appearance of the character, his behaviour, speech or inner monologues, but he should base his narration on a document; 2) plot creating: the biographer adds some fictional characters and events, but they exist only in the background of real historical events; 3) the documentary-fiction: the document thought up by the author presents a certain episode, some local event and produces an impression of the

real evidence; 4) fiction-hypothesis: with its help the author does not reveal or supplement the facts of the original biography of the character, but explains them; it is an assumption, a version of the writer which does not affect the reality (Bugrina, 1986).

When the writer starts to describe the life of a person he changes the available documentary sources and that always results in “radical transformation of individuality, re-comprehension of the empirically established fact” (Ushakova, 2001).

In this vein the point of view of Y. Andreev is correct: “fictional biography is not a chronological enumeration of the facts of life, but it is a narration with some elements of fiction, which help to reveal the image of historical personality and epoch” (Andreev, 1962).

It is obvious that “in English literature – unlike, perhaps, any other literature – there are first class writers, who became famous by writing not “fiction”, but so-called “non-fiction” (Livergant, 2008). “Non-fiction” is considered as the term for biographies, travel sketches, letters, etc. in spite of the fact that this English term is not translated today.

### Example

The works by Beryl Bainbridge (1934-2010) have one of outstanding places in the history of modern English literature.

The novel “According to Queeney” (2001) by Beryl Bainbridge is one of her latest novels about real people and real facts in the British history. Markus Hiltl considers these novels, including “According to Queeney”, can be defined as “faction”, “a term composed of the two words “fact” and “fiction”, is more appropriate to her specific style of historical writing as it is less focused on understanding historical processes and the realistic painting of a historical picture and more inclined to use historical facts and

persons as a background for the expression of universal themes, such as the human folly, the impossibility of communication or the cruelty of human relations" (Hiltl, 2006).

In the western literary criticism the term "faction" describes the literature which is based on the fact, but interpreted rather freely.

"According to Queeney", which can be called a biographical novel (*biographie romancée*), shows "a private" life of a historical person of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) – who was a poet, biographer, lexicographer, essayist, editor and reviewer.

We should point out that nowadays there exists a demand for the biographical genre in Great Britain in spite of the fact that it has an old tradition. According to A.G. Bakanov "a modern person enjoys the possibility to get closer to some well-known historical personalities and feel the peculiarity of the inner world of the past", but for him "the originality of the plot created by the author is also important" (Bakanov, 1987).

From lots of well-known facts of his life B. Bainbridge chooses the least known one, that is his complicated and ambiguous relations with Hester Lynch Thrale,<sup>2</sup> the wife of a well-known brewer of that time Henry Thrale.

In official sources there is little information about the Johnson's acquaintance with the Thrales in January 1765. When Johnson became almost like a member of their family, Streatham Park became the place where intellectual evenings took place. Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774), David Garrick (1717-1779), James Boswell (1740-1795), Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) and others were regular visitors of these evenings. Later to show the respect for Johnson, Henry Thrale built the library, containing books, bought on his recommendations, as well as portraits of his well-known friends, painted by Reynolds: "Its design, Sam", he had said, "will be mine but I

depend on you to choose the books on its shelves" (Bainbridge, 2002, 33).

Richard Bernstein thought that Bainbridge "has devised a plot in which the history is solid and yet the truth is subjective or, to put it differently, in which the characters experience separate realities" (Bernstein, 2007).

The fact of this acquaintance can be considered as biographical since "it did not influence upon his popularity at all, but it was important for his private life, since in their circle he had the brightest and the happiest part of his life" (Scherbakova, 2001).

The criterion of the selection of the biographical material, according to G.O. Vinokur, is the following: "to become a biographical fact the historical fact (the event, etc.) must be *experienced* (italics added) by the person" (Vinokur, 2007). The acquaintance of Johnson with Hester Thrale is a historically recognised fact while close relations are not mentioned anywhere. Writing this biographical novel Bainbridge turned this fact into the biographical.

At this point from the novel we choose the correlation of fact-fiction in the epistolary part of the novel.

It is well known that introduction of letters in the text of a biographical novel was popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The most well-known example is a letter in "The Life of Samuel Johnson" (1791) by Boswell. In the genre of "new biography" the document remains the main (and, sometimes, the only) means of creating authenticity and polyphony. L. Ginzburg pointed out that "there is a constant connection among fiction and history, memoirs and biography – so called "human documents" (Ginzburg, 1971).

In one of the interview B. Bainbridge confessed that one of the reasons of writing a novel was Queeney's letter (daughter of Hester Thrale), which she cited in the novel and which ran "our mother's original and persevering

dislike of her children arose from a hatred of our father" (Bainbridge, 2002, 202). Exactly this fact is a reason of the strange relations between Johnson and Hester Thrale. Moreover, according to the novel, Henry Thrale is rather fond of other women.

In "According to Queeney" the document (both fictional and authentic) is a part of artistic texture of the novel.

On the basis of the novel there are invented by Bainbridge so-called texts "like the document" – letters, written by Hester Thrale's elder daughter Queeney<sup>3</sup> and constantly appearing on pages of the novel with full information about the address, date, the author: "to Miss Laetitia Hawkins, Sion Row, Twickenham, Sept. 21<sup>st</sup>, 1807 – from H.M. Thrale", "To Madame d'Arblay, 54 rue Basse, Passe, France, August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1810 – from H.M. Keith", etc.

The total number of the chapters – seven, the number of letters, written by Queeney, – the same. They are: six letters are correspondence with Miss Laetitia Hawkins<sup>4</sup>, one – with Fanny Burney<sup>5</sup>. Queeney got acquainted with Fanny at one of the parties, given by Doctor Burney. The understanding appeared quickly: "Fanny Burney took an instant liking to Queeney, who, though only fourteen years of age to her twenty-five, appeared quite able to converse on equal terms" (Bainbridge, 198).

Miss Hawkins, who wants to become a writer and supposes that "Johnson Circle" written by her, will be popular with the public, begins this correspondence. She tries as hard as possible to get information from Queeney about Johnson's personality and his milieu. The information given in the letter is of a private nature. So, for instance, in the first letter Queeney recalls "Dr. Johnson dropping to his knees to have a better look on Miss Reynolds's new shoes" (Bainbridge, 22), and also that he had a hen called Socrates. There is information that his watch, which he

left under the pillow, "cost seventeen guineas and was encased in tortoiseshell" (Bainbridge, 133). Queeney writes about Johnson as a remarkable swimmer, which while swimming waves his arms and heaves the waves, and even speaks of particularity of his indigestion: "His preoccupation with orange peel was due to persistent indigestion, a malady brought on by his irregular eating habits; he either fasted or gorged himself" (Bainbridge, 169).

From the letter included in the penultimate chapter of the novel which was written by Queeney to Fanny Burney, we learn that Ms. Hawkins asked Burney to recollect the time spent with Johnson.

Queeney's letter is an answer to the letter written by F. Burney, telling that Miss Hawkins asked her to recall time, spent with Johnson.

In the letter to Miss Hawkins Queeney's unwillingness to answer can be felt: "Over the years her letters to me have rained down like autumn leaves, and neither evading her many questions, not a few of them of an impertinent nature, nor ignoring her correspondence has procured the desired result, namely that she let matters rest" (Bainbridge, 200).

Answering L. Hawkins to comment on the relations between her mother and Johnson, Queeney gives only one phrase: "... she needed an audience and he a home" (Bainbridge, 168).

Queeney's correspondence allows us to see, who Johnson was for "others". The reader sees the reality through Queeney's subjective perception. It is proved by the fact that often the version of the events recollected by Queeney, contradicts the version given in the previous chapter. In the structure of the novel the letters allow us to see, from a different angle, the Johnson's character and his inner world, and also serve as the means of the reconstruction Johnson's psychological portrait (or image) through Queeney's personal memories.

Bainbridge plays with the reader. The created letters give the impression of the authenticity of the correspondence.

In the novel, besides made-up letters, there is also a real document – S. Johnson’s letter to H. Thrale. It just the case when “the biographer can use as a subject of a biographical narration only those realities which are definitely (even indirectly) designated, named or testified” (Valevsky, 1995, 38).

In the novel that is the correspondence of Johnson with H. Thrale. The suppressed feelings can be seen in the letter (existing letter), written in rough tone, because of her coming marriage. We give both variants of the letter for comparison: the original letter (I) and letter, presented in the novel (II):

As we can see there is no significant difference between the letters, but they are not identical.

In the letter given in the novel there is no exact date though it is placed in chapter 1780-4. The exact date of the letter is July, 2 (Friday), 1784.

There are differences in form of address: in the original letter when writing about H. Thrale he spells the pronoun “You” with small letter while in the second letter it is written with a capital one. This, probably, can be explained, on the one hand, by the grand style of the letter, on the other – by the respect to the addressee. This is also true about the noun “fame”, written in the first letter with small letter, in the second – with a capital one.

I	II
<p>Madam: <b>July 2, 1784</b>                      If I interpret your letter right, <b>You</b> are ignominiously married, if it is yet undone, let us once talk together. If <b>You</b> have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your <b>Fame</b>, and your country, may your folly do no further mischief.                      If the last act is yet to do, I, who have loved you, esteemed you, revered you, and served you, I who long thought you the first of human kind, entreat that before your fate is irrevocable, I may once more see <b>You</b>. <b>I was, I once was, Madam, most truly yours,</b>  <b>SAM. JOHNSON</b>  <b>I will come down if you permit it.</b>                      (emphasis added – T.P.)</p> <p>[The letters of Samuel Johnson, 338].</p>	<p>Madam, if I interpret your letter right, <b>you</b> are ignominiously married; if it is yet undone, let us once talk together. If <b>you</b> have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your <b>fame</b> and your country, may your folly do no further mischief. If the last act is yet to do, I, who have loved you, esteemed you, revered you and served you, I who long thought you the first of human kind, entreat that before your fate is irrevocable, I may once more see <b>you</b>.</p> <p>[Bainbridge, 234 – 235].</p>

There are some reasons to consider that this very letter inspired B. Bainbridge to write a novel, based on Johnson’s relationship with H. Thrale. In our opinion, A.L. Valevsky’s statement here is perfectly relevant. He states that, “the life should become presented in the form of the text (historical evidence, memoirs, some document, archive files, etc.) and then it becomes the subject of the attention of a biographer” (Valevsky, 1995, 39).

Also in the second letter two sentences, given in the first one, are missing: “I was, I once was, Madam, most truly yours, SAM. JOHNSON” and “I will come down if you permit it”. This can be explained by the personal will of the writer, who selected authentic material for the novel. Also it can be said that Bainbridge’s novel is neither a scientific, nor academic biography, which demands the scrupulous observation of facts and accuracy of the interpretation. While

fictional biography is free from the scientific accuracy (it does not contradict the facts or turns it to fiction).

Starting from this very letter, written several months before Johnson's death, Hester Thrale began a new life and that was the end of her friendship with Johnson. He realised that he had lost the dearest person, and understood how much she had meant to him. This very moment he felt suffering and solitude.

This letter is, probably, the only evidence of any relations between Johnson and H. Thrale. It is real. So the peculiarity is the variations of interpretation of this document.

D. Zhukov considers that "fiction is justified only in case when there are no other sources of the information, but it must not disagree with the logic of the image" (Zhukov, 1980). So B. Bainbridge does not simply state the fact of their ambiguous relations, but searches for psychological reasons of the behaviour of the character in the first place.

### Resume

Thus, the epistolary part of the novel "According to Queeney" is based on such type of fiction, as "documentary-fiction" (according to classification by N.A. Bugrina). It is illustrated by Queeney's letters made up by B. Bainbridge to create the impression of their absolute authenticity. The introduction of Johnson's real letter in the imitation of Queeney's correspondence strengthens this impression.

The letters, especially written by Queeney, enable us to see not only the events of Johnson's private life, but also to get into his inner world. Thanks to them, we can see entirely different Johnson – in his house, household surroundings, with his drawbacks.

The fiction, presented in them, is used by B. Bainbridge to "portray the inner and emotional life of the writer, as his well-known (factual) biography does not always reflect the emotional

and psychological life of the person" (Kazantseva, 2004).

In the genre of fictional biography the document or the reference to some documentary source is very important. The novel "According to Queeney" is based on real facts and authentic documents, concerning relations between S. Johnson and H. Thrale, not mentioned in the official sources. The document, given above, confirms the fact of these relations and gives authenticity to the narrative.

Introducing letters, B. Bainbridge extends the right of the document into the space of artistic text.

In this genre some suggestions are possible but they should not be claimed the historical facts. B. Bainbridge "added" relations, connecting two people for twenty years. We think that L. Ginzburg is right stating that: "factual digressions cancel neither authenticity as a structural principle of a novel, nor its cognitive and emotional possibilities. This principle makes the documentary literature *documentary*; and the aesthetical structure makes it *literature* (italics supplied). For aesthetic value the selection and creative combination of elements, reflected and transformed are obligatory" (Ginzburg, 1970).

In the novel "According to Queeney" B. Bainbridge adds the documentary facts to the real facts with a considerable part of the author's imagination which is close to reality, subjective, unauthentic.

Reconstructing relations of the characters, B. Bainbridge tries to reveal that possible past, which remained unknown on paper. But this past is unknown.

Thereby, in the novel "According to Queeney", B. Bainbridge fills blanks (or "gaps" – a definition by an American researcher P. Kendall) in relations between Johnson and H. Thrale, because there are no documents about some periods. There are some moments in the

relationship between Johnson and H. Thrale which are not proved by any documents.

In biographies there is always some invention and B. Bainbridge has reconstructed the possible variant of the image of S. Johnson.

The harmonious combination of documentary sources with artistic fiction is a bright, genre-forming sign in the novel "According to Queeney" by B. Bainbridge, comprising the peculiarities of both fiction and fact literature.

The novel "According to Queeney" belongs to a genre of the biographical novel; it is one of the bright examples of modern literary process which V.V. Strukov describes the following way, "the vanishing of the borders between literature

and history. Historical knowledge in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century influences genre features of works of fiction: historical accuracy loses its importance and appeal for postmodernists, it is replaced by imagination» (Strukov, 2000).

Liza Picard in *The Daily Mail* marks that in this novel "Bainbridge is brilliant at combining established fact and compelling fiction, the one deftly underpinning the other"<sup>6</sup>.

Publishing this novel B. Bainbridge again proved that she "is one of the most skilled of contemporary novelists – ruthlessly unsentimental, darkly funny and possessing her own unique vision of the variety and vanity of human nature" (Rennison, 2005).

<sup>1</sup> Ref. The Dictionary of the Russian language by S. Ozhegov and Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary on the English Language.

<sup>2</sup> Hester Lynch Thrale (born Hester Lynch Salusbury and after her second marriage, Hester Lynch Piozzi) (1741-1821). She has some articles, such as «Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson», 1786.

<sup>3</sup> Hester Maria Thrale (1764-1857), but then H.M. Keith, after 1808.

<sup>4</sup> Laetitia Matilda Hawkins (1760-1835) – John Hawkin's daughter, who was written biography of S. Johnson (1787).

<sup>5</sup> Fanny Burney (then madame d'Arblay) (1752-1840) – doctor Burney's daughter, author of novels and plays.

<sup>6</sup> On the back of the cover.

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## **«ФАКТ-ВЫМЫСЕЛ» (fact-fiction)**

### **как основа эпистолярной составляющей романа Берил Бейнбридж «Согласно Куини»**

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*В статье анализируется соотношение вымышленного и документального начал в романе Берил Бейнбридж «Согласно Куини», представляющем собой жанр романизированной биографии. Исследователь анализирует особенности этого соотношения в эпистолярной части романа, занимающей одно из главных мест в повествовательной ткани произведения. Бейнбридж, описывая жизнь героя, опирается на подлинные факты и при этом интерпретирует их согласно своему, авторскому, видению.*

*Ключевые слова: современная английская литература, роман-биография, факт, вымысел, письмо, вариативность истолкования (интерпретация), С. Джонсон, Б. Бейнбридж.*

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