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A Narrated Life. On Dorrit Willumsen's Biofiction *Marie. A Novel About the Life of Madame Tussaud* (1986)

Biographies are stories on human life and achievement, or, more precisely, “the simulation, in words, of a man’s life from all that is known about the man.”¹ This simple statement entails the fundamental discrepancy which occurs in the life-writing practice: the necessity of combining two different orders — that of reality and that of a text. How it is done depends on the biographer, but the problem of “fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning”² remains unchanged. The present article discusses briefly the basic assumptions of narrativity, i.e. the means by which human existence is approached and transposed into a narrative. Main interest is put on a contemporary biofictional literary text by a Danish author Dorrit Willumsen (born 1940) and her story of Marie Tussaud, the French wax artist. On the example of Willumsen’s novel some possible ways of narrativizing a person’s life are demonstrated, but it needs to be asserted that the spectre of possible means of reconstruction and narrativization of human existence is endless, hence this article only offers a modest insight into a vast field of research on narrated lives.

As Roland Barthes puts it, narrative “like life itself, ... is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural.”³ By emphasizing narrative’s universality and comparing it to life the French intellectual makes one of the

¹ Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography*, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., New York, 1965, p. 15. It is worth mentioning that today the word “person” instead of “man” would be more appropriate.

² Hayden White, *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality*, [in:] W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *On Narrative*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1981, p. 1.

³ Roland Barthes, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives* (transl. by Lionel Duisit), “New Literary History” vol. 6, no. 2, Winter 1975, p. 237.

most significant observations in narratology: he acknowledges the human ability and desire to perceive a seemingly purposeless sequence of events or actions as a meaningful whole. What has been applied by Barthes to any verbal and mental activity, is also true in describing human existence. Whether we like it or not, reconstructing human life is subordinate to the concept of chronology, cohesion and meaningfulness. Even if we are unaware of it, telling a tale of a person's life and accomplishment (or the lack of it) takes form of a linear narrative where the milestones are determined, uneventful passages of life omitted, unnecessary complexities unravelled or smoothed out and the existence as a whole ascribed a meaning and solemnity. The narratee's life is usually permeated by a sense of purpose, often discerned already in their childhood and steering them through their adulthood and old age. At the same time, living the actual life is experienced by most people as chaotic, incoherent and devoid of a higher purpose. In other words, a life lived is by no means the same as a life described, because all attempts at recreating an individual's fate inevitably lead to its distortion and modification. A life narrated becomes a life textualized, i.e. encumbered by words, twisted by the perspective of the narrator and deprived of its inherent randomness, the more so, if the narratee once inhabited the real world.⁴ In one of her most insightful texts on the essence of biography, Virginia Woolf mockingly observes:

Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank; all we have to do is to look and to listen and to listen and to look and soon the little figures—for they are rather under life size—will begin to move and to speak, and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant, for they thought when they were alive that they could go where they liked; and as they speak we shall read into their sayings all kinds of meanings which never struck them, for they believed when they were alive that they said straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different.⁵

The British writer and critic draws the readers' attention to two founding stones of the biographical practice: the tendency to arrange seemingly

⁴The remarks on narrativizing an individual life apply to all modes of textual historical representation. The issue has been discussed by numerous scholars, such as i.e. Hayden White or Frank Ankersmit who indicate performative character of historiography. Using Binne de Haan's words, "performativity' means that the past comes back to life in and through the text itself" (*Personalised history. On biofiction, source criticism and the critical value of biography*, [in:] Hans Renders, Binne de Haan & Jonne Harmsma (eds.), *Biographical Turn. Lives in History*, Routledge, London and New York 2017, p. 60.

⁵Virginia Woolf, *'I am Christina Rossetti'*, [in:] ead., *The Common Reader. Second Series*, The Hogarth Press, London 1965, p. 237.

disparate events of life into a logical whole and the oppressive role that the biographer plays in his/her biographee's life. Needless to say, the oppression in this context is barely meant as a tool of violating the protagonist: on the contrary, biography-writing is usually a declaration of love, fascination and yearning for a deeper knowledge of the chosen individual. And yet, the biographer cannot escape their role as an oppressor of the biographee's existence, since all interference with it amounts to recreation and reconstruction of a lived life. Hence, a biography is paradoxically more often a story of the biographer him-/herself than that of the biographee.⁶ Therefore the concept of truth is and should be alien to all biographies — not because of their authors' willingness to confabulate and mislead the reader — but due to the inherent mutual exclusivity of the two systems: the realness and the textuality. No text can be identical with a lived life, neither should it be. The human existence depicted in a text is subject to a necessary process of (re)arranging, eliminating and — last but not least — interpreting. The moulding of an individual, past life into a comprehensible literary pattern is called narrativization, as it is always subject to a pre-existing mode of narration, governing all forms of verbal, mental and textual expression. In the following this is going to be elucidated on the example of a Danish biofictional novel about the famous Madame Marie Tussaud by Dorrit Willumsen. In *Marie. A Novel About the Life of Madame Tussaud* (1986, transl. by Patricia Crampton, Danish edition 1983) a story of the 18th century protagonist is described by a contemporary woman writer who, to use a travesty of Robert Skidelsky's statement, is a product of her hour,⁷ i.e. demonstrates views and opinions concordant with her times. The contemporary lens combined with an individualized narrative technique used in the novel help demonstrate how the historical life of Madame Tussaud and today's perspective of Dorrit Willumsen illuminate each other, allowing a universal story on a woman fate to emerge on the pages of the novel.

The chosen literary work does not aspire to truthfully reconstruct Marie Tussaud's life, since its generic provenance is more fictional than factual, which is already stated in the paratext ("a novel"). There are certainly other works which deal with Madame Tussaud's life (like, for instance, *Madame Tussaud. Waxworker Extraordinary* by Anita Leslie and Pauline Chapman from 1978, or *Madame Tussaud. A Life in Wax* by Kate Berridge from 2006) where

⁶ This is certainly not to be understood literally. The events and persons depicted in biographies do have their counterparts in real life, but the adopted perspective is always restricted to the biographer.

⁷ Skidelsky argues that "the hour produces the man, not the other way round". Conf. Robert Skidelsky, *Only Connect: Biography and Truth*, [in:] Eric Homberger and John Charmley (eds.), *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1988, p. 2.

the degree of fictionalization of the biographee and her life is minimal, but also they follow the “narrative instinct,” i.e. the life depiction is chronological, logically motivated and shaped according to a widely-acclaimed narrative pattern (with an introduction, the middle and the end of the story), so it is worth noticing that even scientific biographies are to some extent fictional. Dorrit Willumsen does not maintain that what she chooses to reveal about her protagonist is the truth, but merely her version of the truth. This is also all biofictions’ prerogative, since in terms of the genre, they are situated on the verge between fiction and facts, fabrication and verifiable data.⁸ This is also here where narrativization of human existence can be given free rein.

Since narrations on historical persons have more in common with fictional narrations than with life itself, the same narrative devices and solutions can be identified in them. Biographies and biofictions follow therefore the same patterns as works of fiction in terms of their composition, construction of characters and teleology. As Paul Ricoeur remarks, life stories are more “intelligible when they are applied to narrative models — borrowed from history and fiction (drama and novels).”⁹ Consequently, biographical stories tend to be structured in accordance with the novelistic model, i.e. they usually revolve around a subordinate concept of purpose in life which is the governing compositional principle in the work. As a rule, the purpose or a ‘determining factor’ in life is already discerned in the protagonist’s childhood and it makes itself distinct throughout the whole biography. It can be an extraordinary talent which is exhibited at an early stage of the protagonist’s development, or a significant event which becomes emblematic of the his/her whole existence. Thus, basing on a rule of selecting relevant events, the plot is shaped to confirm the interpretation of life adopted by the biographer. In the case of Willumsen’s *Marie*, both determining factors are present. Young Marie is described as a sensitive and talented child from the very beginning, i.e. from the age of five, when the literary narration starts. The prophetic character of her childhood is also present on a symbolic plane: when departing from Berne, little Marie has to leave her porcelain doll behind, which can easily be interpreted as a harbinger of her future career as a sculptor of prominent persons (she says goodbye to a toy in order to take up a serious task of sculpting historical people). The figures of dolls, marionettes and wax sculptures of people appear throughout the whole novel and usually bear a symbolic meaning, usually connected with restrictions,

⁸For further information on biofiction see for instance Michael Lackey (ed.), *Biographical Fiction. A Reader*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York & London & Oxford & New Delhi & Sydney 2016.

⁹Paul Ricoeur, *Narrative identity* (transl. by Mark S. Muldon), “Philosophy today,” vol. 35, no. 1, Spring 1991, p. 73.

limitations and subordination. But the prevailing symbolic event in the novel is a prophecy of a Gypsy who reads little Marie's palm and sees a gap in her lifeline. This fictitious occurrence is pivotal for the novel's composition, as the mentioned gap, or an abrupt turning of fate, seems to influence the whole life of Marie, which, as Anne Birgitte Rønning remarks, involves numerous goodbyes. The Norwegian scholar even designates the work as a "farewell novel" ("opbrudsroman") and discusses several ways, the actual partings and departures are described in *Marie*.¹⁰ Simultaneously, Maria Krysztofiak, who also does research on Willumsen's novel, reflects on various voyages that are constituent for Marie's identity.¹¹ Such a composition of a biographical novel, although not uncommon, belongs to the domain of fictional plots, and the fact that the biographer has decided to design her protagonist's existence in relation to the fictitious prophecy, is one of the tokens of the biographer's oppression towards the historical person, but since the novel is a biofiction, not a scientific biography, introduction of fabricated events can only be beneficial for understanding the phenomenon of the outstanding female sculptor. Some other aspects of narrativization of Madame Tussaud's life are described below.

As in the majority of other literary works, narrativization of Marie's life is governed by two major aspects: the time and the mode of narrating. The former refers basically to the biographer's contemporariness and is expressed by his/her cultural background and ethical standpoints, whilst the latter addresses the adopted mode of narration in form of the purely textual phenomena such as narrators, focalization techniques, dialogues and so on. Both the time and mode of narrating are certainly closely connected and determine each other. In the case of Dorrit Willumsen's story of Madame Tussaud the main focus is put on the artistic provenance of the biographee, but also on an intersubjective relation of understanding between a 17th century sculptor and a 20th century writer. The two women — the historical and textual Madame Tussaud and the contemporary Dorrit Willumsen, who is implied in the text — seem to share an experience of being a female artist in a world where patriarchy is (still) the dominating social pattern. Therefore it can be stated that the time of narrating in *Marie* is expressed in Willumsen's reticently empathetic attitude towards her protagonist, which, in turn, results from her feminist viewpoint.

¹⁰ Anne Birgitte Rønning, *Historiens diskurser. Historiske romaner mellom fiksjon og historieskrivning*, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo 1996, p. 137.

¹¹ Maria Krysztofiak, *En litterær biografi og narrative identitetsbilleder. Dorrit Willumsens roman Marie. Madame Tussauds liv*, "Folia Scandinavica Posnaniensia" vol. 14, 2012, p. 53.

Marie was published in Denmark in 1983, following a stormy and prolific debate on women's issues in the 1970s. The feminist movement manifested itself in various initiatives, such as organizing all-women support groups, camps, meetings and demonstrations, but also discussions on inequality between the sexes in the public sphere. It made its mark on culture as well, especially on literature, which could be observed in form of numerous publications, both factual and fictional. The heyday of literary activity which was no longer reserved for the educated and professional writers, did not contribute to a high aesthetic quality of the published works, but it definitely introduced the issue of woman identity into the public and literary sphere. Dorrit Willumsen also participated in the fiery debate on the cultural construct of female identity, even though her voice in the discourse has always been subtle and not straightforward. This Danish writer of a modernist origin prefers to resort to irony, grotesque or biographical fiction in order to express her opinions. It is also the case in *Marie*, as the novel is focused on the issue of a female artist's identity with emphasis put on "female". Adopting a modern, contemporary perspective, Willumsen inspects her protagonist's existence from different angles and depicts her evolution in private and public life. The major fields of interest in achieving a full female and artistic identity by Marie Tussaud are: womanhood in a private and social perspective, i.e. portraying Marie in confrontation with various models of femininity, and womanhood realized in art, i.e. describing the artist's struggles to acquire status, recognition and money. What is also characteristic of this biofiction and numerous biofictions as such is its preoccupation with the time and spheres of the protagonist's life which little is known of, i.e. respectively her childhood and early youth, as well as her thoughts and feelings. That is why Willumsen's narration on Madame Tussaud's existence takes form of an inner portrait rather than a regular recreation of her doings. Exploration of emotion-based motivations and the inner life of the protagonist can in turn be perceived both as an outcome of the widely-practised "women literature"¹² of the 1970s, and a response of the biofictional genre to traditional biographies which are prone to introduce as much amassed knowledge on the protagonist in their narration as possible.

Marie's feminine identity in the novel is not a part of existence which is taken for granted by the protagonist, but rather a goal to be determined and acquired by her. Willumsen wants her heroine to consider numerous variants of feminine "role models" of her epoch before Marie decides to

¹² The vague and ambiguous term "women's literature" ("kvindelitteratur") stands for literature written by women writers and concerning women's experiences, values and outlook on life. Cf. Lise Busk-Jensen: kvindelitteratur i *Den Store Danske*, Gyldendal, access 23 August 2018 to <http://denstoredanske.dk/index.php?sideId=112380>.

identify herself with any of them. In the end, Madame Tussaud does not adopt any of the feminine constructs at her disposal, but creates her own, artistic identity, which can be regarded as a manifestation of Willumsen's own beliefs and reflects the postmodernist background of her works. On the purely compositional basis, none of the alternatives of a woman's lifestyle in the novel seems appealing enough to tempt an ambitious and sensitive artist. The main models of woman behaviour and life choice which can be considered an option for the 17th century protagonist duplicate invariably the patriarchal social system and are either focused on cultivating and maintaining feminine beauty, or on finding fulfilment in motherhood and domestic life. In other words, Marie knows from her early childhood that she can either become a seductress (or a sexual object) or/and a mother, both of which being an effect of subordination to a man and whose realization is possible only thanks to possessing a female body. A third option, which in turn does not involve exploitation the body, but rather exploration of the soul, is choosing a pious, religious way, represented in the novel by king Louis' sister, Elisabeth, but the vigorous and ambitious Marie does not find this kind of life appealing. The gallery of the "seductresses," or simply attractive and beautiful women whose identity is reduced to their bodies is quite impressive in the novel. Marie has the opportunity to observe an ideal model of femininity from her childhood, as her own mother is the first paragon of feminine charm and grace for her. According to the five-year-old protagonist, her mother (or any ideal woman) "is a lady," "her skin is soft as honey," "her mouth is red otherwise she is pale and refined and has headaches."¹³ Another significant example of femininity in Marie's life is the so-called "sleeping beauty," i.e. the Duchess of Lamballe, whose sensual, erotic appeal is exploited by Marie's uncle and father-figure Curtius, the founder and creator of the famous Wax Cabinet. Curtius, driven by public acclaim, popularity and money, makes a wax sculpture of "the sleeping beauty" in an erotic, ambiguous pose, rendering the beauty of her face and body as scrupulously as he can, and displays it in his Cabinet. The image of the passive and vulnerable Duchess of Lamballe makes a great impact on young Marie whose outrage is anachronistic in relation to her times and therefore presents a contemporary perspective of Dorrit Willumsen. As the model of the seductress evolves often into another feminine role in life — that of a mother — Marie Tussaud also confronts with this choice in the novel's plot. The main paragon here is again her own mother who with time has become an exemplary housewife. Even though adult Marie does not wish to follow in

¹³ Dorrit Willumsen, *Marie. A Novel About the Life of Madame Curie* (transl. by Patricia Crampton), The Bodley Head Ltd.. London 1986, pp. 8-9.

her mother's footsteps, she eventually marries Francois Tussaud and gives birth to two sons. But the motherhood experienced by the protagonist does not provide her with the sense of fulfilment she has expected to reach, and it turns out that the role of a mother is not satisfactory enough for the artist. The described quandaries and emotions which accompany motherhood are by all means contemporary for the times of the biographer, even if the nature of the experience is universal and timeless. The conviction that marriage and children do not guarantee a woman's happiness is common today, but was not put into debate for over 200 years ago. Willumsen's Marie Tussaud is undoubtedly a loving and caring mother, but her need to return to her passion, i.e. sculpting in wax, cannot be ignored, so in order to pursue her ambitions and build her own career she leaves Paris and takes to London with one of her sons. This historically verified event serves the writer to elucidate the artist's motivations, doubts and thoughts. The 17th century Marie shows a great deal of self-awareness when contemplating the issue of abandoning her family in order to make a career, and expresses herself with a striking honesty on her choices and their consequences:

But no woman deserts her child. Even when I was going to Paris I felt it was wrong, though I felt relief and happiness at the same time, a pure and simple selfish gladness at being able to concentrate again, have ideas and move quickly and lightly.¹⁴

Her reflections are certainly justified by the life situation, the historical Madame Tussaud found herself in, but the explanation and argumentation is undoubtedly of contemporary origin. Hence Marie rejects the two major woman lifestyles, that of a seductress and that of a mother, since they do not meet her expectations as to establishing her own identity. According to Dorrit Willumsen's *Marie*, life satisfaction and fulfilment can only be achieved by Madame Tussaud through artistic creativity. The fact that both the author of the biofiction and her protagonist are women artists contributes to a better understanding of Madame Tussaud's motivations and desires by the contemporary Danish writer and helps to create a more private inner portrait of the wax sculptress. In the 17th century a woman artist was a bizarre and "unnatural" being, and embarking on an artistic career was an act of transgression and entering a territory dominated by men. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their iconic book on the position of a woman writer *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) pay attention to the phenomenon of "literary paternity," i.e. a widespread, though subconscious, conviction of a male descent of literature. The term can also be applied to any other form on artistic creativity, since women were for a long time denied

¹⁴Ibid., p. 182.

active participation in art creation, their role being restricted to consumers of art.¹⁵ Also Marie Tussaud puts herself in a vulnerable position by her decision to make art her life path. As a female artist, she learns her trade solely from men, especially from Curtius, and she discusses the premises of artistic creation with men (for example Voltaire and Jacques-Louis David), which is why it is extremely difficult for her to define the essence of art from a woman's viewpoint. As it emerges from Willumsen's recreation of Madame Tussaud's life, the objectives with her art is "to reach soul through the skin"¹⁶ of her model, and the very process of creating a wax figure absorbs her to such an extent that she becomes unaware of her surroundings; this can be observed in the scene of her sculpting the mask of Voltaire.¹⁷ Marie's urge to look under the surface to get to know and recreate the private person coincides with her biographer's aim to create an inner portrait of the artist.¹⁸ Willumsen seems to indicate that in this respect both Madame Tussaud and herself are cast from the same mould, since their art stems from the need to tell the hypothetical, possible truth about the model or protagonist. Postmodernist in her artistic assumptions, the Danish author allows her character to resemble herself in terms of the artistic identity. In the special bond established between these two female artists an echo of Willumsen's feminist proclivities can be heard. Accordingly, the narrated life of Marie Tussaud becomes much more contemporary and thus universal. All this is done by means of the modes of narrating.

Traditionally, biographies tend to be told by a third-person omniscient narrator who is situated outside the world of the story, i.e. is external. Such a narrator has absolute power over its characters and mode of narrating, even if it is not always directly demonstrated. In Gérard Genette's terminology this kind of narrator is called heterodiegetic and extradiegetic.¹⁹ Such narratorial stance is meant to safeguard the story's supposed objectivity and hence to gain the reader's trust as to the its verifiability. Nevertheless, the principle does not apply to biofictions, and not in the least to Dorrit Willumsen's *Marie*. In the novel one dominating narrator cannot be distinguished, even though a heterodiegetic narrator occurs there. Its voice can presumably

¹⁵ Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1979.

¹⁶ Dorrit Willumsen, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-40.

¹⁸ Maria Krysztofak in the above mentioned article writes more on the relation between the both artists' approach to their art.

¹⁹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay In Method* (transl. by Jane E. Lewin), Cornell University Press, New York 1980, pp. 212-262.

signify the author's. But the narratorial situation in the novel is much more complex. Apart from the third-person heterodiegetic narrator, other voices telling the story can be discerned. Dorrit Willumsen quite often allows her protagonist to take initiative and tell the story of her life from her own perspective. This is done by a first-person homodiegetic narrator in its autodiegetic variant, according to Genette,²⁰ which means that the story is told by a participant and witness of the events in the world of the story, and in the autodiegetic variant — by the protagonist who narrates about his/her own life. Introducing an autodiegetic narrator into a biography is uncommon, since the sense of personality it implies is fictitious in its nature (the author does not and cannot have access to the historical person's thoughts and feelings), therefore cannot be a source of reliable information. In other words, what is allowed and desirable in fiction, tends to be inexcusable in non-fictional texts. A German narratologist, Käte Hamburger, who discusses issues of narratorial stances in literature, claims that "the origins of first-person narration lie in the structure of autobiographical statement,"²¹ which excludes these types of statements from the realm of non-fictional texts such as biographies or historical narratives. But since straddling fiction and non-fiction lies in biofiction's nature, the first-person narratives are admissible in such texts due to their specific goal which does not always overlap with those of traditional biographies. This goal, as I have already mentioned, is creating an inner portrait of the historical person, can be obtained by resorting to "psycho-narration," being a technique "for presenting the mental life of third persons."²² Although this type of portraiture is often carried out by a third-person omniscient narrator, using "conjectural and inferential syntax,"²³ resorting to autodiegetic mode of narration can be perceived as one of its variants. Heterogeneity of narratorial voices in *Marie* has its justification in the plot and is intertwined with the actual emotions of the protagonist. The third-person narrator occurs whenever an external focus is necessary, whilst the narration in first person is chosen whenever Madame Tussaud is stirred, indignant or touched, and is aware of her feeling. Therefore there is a relation between the mode of narration and the process of establishing the protagonist's identity. The more Marie knows of herself, the more often she uses her own voice. This technique can be seen as an expression

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Käte Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature* (transl. by Marilyn J. Rose), Indiana University Press, Bloomington London 1973, p. 311.

²² Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London 1999, p. 26.

²³ Ibid., p. 27.

of the contemporary standpoint of the novel's author by emphasizing the empowerment of women by allowing them to speak for themselves.²⁴ As the narration progresses, Marie's voice is heard more often, especially with reference to her artistic passion. This signifies the process of her maturation which can be deemed complete at the end of the novel where elderly Madame Tussaud, proud of her oeuvre, looks back on her life and re-examines it:

I do not know how much I decided for myself. It often seems to me that events poured over me like waves. Perhaps there are things I should have done differently, but I have no regrets; although I often lie awake at night.²⁵

The final confession of the protagonist, expressed by the first-person narrator, strikes as honest and disillusioned, and constitutes a closure of her story. The insight which she has gained is a result of the artistic identity, she has struggled and succeeded to create; this is emphasized by the fact that the novel's final scene is set in Marie Tussaud's Wax Cabinet in London.

Narration is the main vehicle of referring to a historical person's existence, but its use leads inexorably to the distortion of the past life. This is because the only medium that enables the story to be told is the author who re-designs his/her hero's fate according to his/her perceptions and concepts. The oppressive character of this relation is inherent in every biography and biofiction, since it is not possible to tell a story of another human being without resorting to one's own cultural and social capital. In the case of Dorrit Willumsen and her novel on Marie Tussaud, the realities of the 1980s in Denmark and the author's solidarity with another female artist determine the novel's character and message. By varied narrative techniques she succeeds in creating a portrait of a 17th century wax sculptress who bears resemblance to any contemporary woman. The problems she experiences, such as juggling family life with a career, her dilemmas and choices are universal for a woman's existence. This seems to be the main goal of biofictions: to move a historical figure closer to the reader so that he/she can mirror him-/herself in the narration on the protagonist's fate. Even if the narrated events only could have happened.

²⁴The concept of developing or rather uncovering women's own mode of expression was taken up by the so-called gynocriticism with Elaine Showalter as a leading figure with her *A Literature of Their Own* (1977).

²⁵Dorrit Willumsen, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

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A Narrated Life. On Dorrit Willumsen's Biofiction *Marie. A Novel About the Life of Madame Tussaud* (1986)

Abstracts

The article discusses the issue of narrativization of human existence in biofictions with a Danish novel by Dorrit Willumsen *Marie. A Novel About the Life of Madame Tussaud* (1986) serving as an example. With reference to narratologists such as Gérard Genette or Hayden White, the author presents the oppressive role of the biographer in the process of narrativizing human life. Nevertheless, the oppression is not perceived pejoratively, but as a chance to bring a historical figure closer to the contemporary reader. Thanks to the biographer's cultural background, new interpretative potential is liberated in order to make a historical person's doings more understandable for today's reader. In the case of *Marie*, a strategy of an inner portrait has been employed by resorting to various narratorial voices and autodiegetic narration which is untypical of biography.

Keywords: biofiction, Dorrit Willumsen, narrativization, Danish literature, narrative strategies.