

Katherine Price

MULTI-FEATHERED FLOCK: ONE BOOK'S PLACE
IN CONTEMPORARY BIOGRAPHIES

THE ART OF BIOGRAPHY customarily answers to a set of conventions we do not associate with art. Traditionally, truth in biography is achieved through a marriage of emotional distance and intellectual scrutiny; the author assumes and maintains distinct boundaries between himself and his subject. Objectivity reveals its multi-tentacled head in a thousand small features, from the use of the third person to those proofs of purchase, footnotes, to the gathering of interviews, of other voices and perspectives, finding then a certain promise of safety in numbers. All of this accumulates nevertheless into the biographer's implicitly subjective perspective.

Many contemporary biographers are calling into question traditional distance between author and subject. Self-reference has crept into the genre just as it has in all literary genres, ultimately accomplishing the same ends: destabilizing or refashioning our concept of truth. The author's self-referentiality may be esthetic, concerning writerly issues, in which the writing of the biography is as much about the act of writing as it is about the ostensible subject or life in question. A kind of meta-biography, Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* is as much an exploration of the disputes among Sylvia Plath's biographers as it is a biography of Plath.

Some contemporary biographers borrow elements from other genres. In Julia Blackburn's *Daisy Bates in the Desert*, the author mingles history, biography, memoir and novelistic improvisation to create a record of two journeys: Daisy Bates's as the first white woman to live among Aborigines in uncharted regions of the Australian outback, and Julia Blackburn's as the first of Bates's biographers to delve into the interstices and mysteries of her subject's pathological lying. Blackburn creates a record of Bates's life that is also a record of Blackburn creating that life, her sorting through the letters, diaries, field notes and photographs, as well as

The White Blackbird: a granddaughter's life of the painter Margarett Sargent, by Honor Moore. Viking Publishers, May, 1996.

through the lies and contradictions of her subject's character. Blackburn creates a shifting "I" that is in some parts clearly the author, encountering her subject's "she" on the terrain of the page. In other parts Blackburn's "I" becomes Bates's "I," in fictionalized voice, thinking and acting in the present tense, recreating scenes from her life in the desert, rewriting Bates's diaries. At times Blackburn's identity seems to lose its distinction, as if merging with Bates's, as overtly as Bates's life on the page has been subjectively shaped by Blackburn.

Katherine Frank, in her book *A Passage to Egypt: The Life of Lucie Duff Gordon*, documents the life of a Victorian woman who emigrated from London society to Egypt in 1862, as well as Frank's pursuit of Gordon. Frank traveled to Egypt in Gordon's footsteps, a passage she slips in underneath Gordon's passage, in her extensive footnotes which sometimes climb three-fourths of the way up the page. Frank has said that much of the new subjectivity in biography is occurring among women writing other women's lives, by authors engaging in what British critics call "auto/biography." The slash signals the tenuous territory where author and subject greet each other face to face; the slash is the door through which "auto" creeps into "biography," the subjective creeps into the objective.

Honor Moore's *The White Blackbird*, about the life of American painter Margaret Sargent (1892–1978), is a portrait of one woman's struggle to develop as an artist in the early part of this century. In the first chapter, Moore delineates, in auto/biographic style, her own efforts to research Sargent's life, narrative accounts of interviews and family visits, as well as her own personal stake in writing the book. Moore introduces Sargent as the sphinx-like occupant of a bed in a sanitarium, where she had been hospitalized for manic depression during the last several years of her life. Moore introduces herself as well, sitting by her grandmother's bed, asking questions such as "Tell me about your life, Grandma. Tell me how you became an artist," though "unable to ask" what she really wanted to know: "What must I do not to go 'mad' as you have? What must I do to live fully as an artist and a woman?"

The book proceeds to answer the first set of questions with every tool of objectivity in the biographer's arsenal, only returning to the unasked questions near the end of the book when Moore's "I" resurfaces. If author and reader are to find answers to the unasked questions, the answers

are implicit. We are left with a vividly detailed tableau of Sargent's life and the residue of Moore's questions.

Margarett Sargent was born in 1892 into upper society Boston. The biography reads at times like a Who's Who list of Harvard graduates, whose thick accumulation, bordering on cliqueishness, is an accurate portrayal of Sargent's milieu. The world Margarett inhabited as a young woman in the 1910s is the world in Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady," with its Boston society girl's motto: "I shall sit here, serving tea to friends. . . ." Moore deftly weaves historical markers into Sargent's life, enlarging the scope of her material. Historical watersheds intersect with Sargent's life; public history weds personal history. Margarett's birth year, 1892, was marked by Lizzie Borden's ax murders; Margarett's arrival in London as a young woman of eighteen after a year of finishing school in Florence, coincides with the coronation of George V, emblematic of "the passing of the Edwardian Age"; her debut ball is announced in the *Boston Traveler* next to news of Evelyn Nesbit Thaw whose husband was in jail for murdering Stanford White. Two world wars introduce loss into Sargent's life and signal a "loss of innocence" for both America and Sargent. Her early experience as a theatre-goer involved theatrical genres of the time: Houdini, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, vaudeville and minstrelsy—Margarett's, as well as perhaps Boston's upper society's, "first introduction to people different from herself."

From the beginning a difficult, moody child, prone to headaches and illness, Sargent rejected the tea room destiny. *The White Blackbird* is also a portrait of the "conflict between art and female obligation in upper-class, old family Boston," a conflict Moore interprets as inevitably resulting in Sargent's "madness" and eventual hospitalization. Her story as a young woman reads like an Edith Wharton novel, with the curious twist of the iconoclastic society girl prevailing in her rebellions, until she marries much later, when her real troubles begin. Until then Sargent seemed oblivious to the scandals surrounding her actions. In 1912, at the age of twenty, she upset Boston society by breaking off an engagement, not because her fiancé was a drinker or a brash New Yorker, but because she wanted "to go to Italy to sculpt." Her exposure to Florentine sculpture as a young woman in finishing school in Italy changed forever her sense of her own ambitions.

One of the most interesting aspects of this compelling book is how Sargent's experiences provide an insider's look at Modernism's rise in America. Sargent apprenticed herself to notable mentors, among them Gutzon Borglum, sculptor of Mt. Rushmore, and painter George Luks, flamboyant member of The Eight, a group of artists that included Maurice Prendergast, who rejected the conventions of "new art realism" in the 1910s with their European-inspired Modernist art. Through Sargent's life we encounter first hand the early artists' colony at Ogunquit in the 1910s (which included Edward Hopper) and its internal rivalry between old and new school, those resisting Modernism and those espousing it. From the beginning Margaret gravitated toward the latter, becoming "a convert" and rejecting as "dreadful" her fourth-cousin John Singer Sargent's painting of a flamenco dancer.

Sargent's iconoclasm extended beyond the realms of art. Sexually adventurous, she had affairs with both men and women, which didn't stop with her marriage of convenience in the 1920s. Her beauty bewitched artists and decadents as well as proper society. Among her friends were the writers Jane Bowles (a paramour), Archibald MacLeish, (who wrote about her in his poem "The Chantress" in 1916), and Ziegfeld star Fanny Brice. While in Paris Sargent met, among others, Alberto Giacometti, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Edith Wharton, and Marie Laurencin.

Moore slips into the present tense, creating fictionalized scenes, to evoke Sargent in the act of sculpting or painting. These are among the most lyrical passages of the book: "As the clay softens in her hands, the experience of looking becomes knowledge of the soldier's form. Now she pulls that knowledge through the clay which, as long as it stays soft, has the pliancy of flesh. She works outside thought, or thought enters the motion of her hands."

The focus of the biographer follows the focus of Sargent, whose own family members took a backseat in her thoughts the more heavily involved in the world of art she became. The characters of her siblings and parents are more fully present in the beginning of the book, but disappear as Sargent's involvement with artists takes the forefront; by contrast, Sargent's children are not strong presences in the book, mirroring their marginal position in Sargent's life, until she abandoned painting in favor of horticulture in the late 1930s.

However explicit Moore makes her relationship to her grandmother, that relationship never overpowers the autonomy of Sargent's identity. The role Moore's "I" plays is marginal, surfacing primarily in the beginning and towards the end, providing a framework to her examination of Sargent's life, but never overpowering Sargent's life on the page. She lets others interpret Margaret for her, old friends, acquaintances and family members. Moore's self-reference serves to make clear the author's intentions, but never assumes central position as subject matter. Margaret Sargent emerges distinct. The reader is left with the sense that Moore has been "true" in the conventional sense of the term, true to the facts, however informed by contemporary biography her work may be.