Biography Afield

BIOGRAPHY AFIELD

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I

This collection is about biography in the sense of life-writing, but also in the sense of the lived life. It does not exclude perspectives on related concepts, such as personhood and subjectivity; and it fails neatly to separate these subject-matters. To be sure, this failure is far from uncommon, seeing as biography, as a theoretical subject-matter, continues to be discussed by way of its slippery and multivalent objects: person, subject, life, oeuvre. In the deconstruction of biography, this range of objects provides a variety of targets that are as indispensable as they are unmissable. In spite of its enduring success with scholarly as well as non-scholarly reading publics, biography has been reviled and declared epistemologically illegitimate an uncounted number of times. Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu are probably its most frequently quoted theoretical detractors in recent decades. From their point of view, summarized as crudely as possible (and somewhat transgressively unified), authorship is a function of textuality, the subject an epiphenomenon of discourse and practice, and personhood merely a complex of positions in a field of socially established cultural distinctions. Biography is fraud because its object is an illusion.[1]

This lesson, when it was taught in the 1960s and 70s, barely progressed beyond the stance of literary modernism and psychoanalysis, which had pursued the demolition of biography, personhood, and subjectivity with equal zest a few decades earlier. If, in addition, one takes into consideration such classics of the literary dismantling of life-writing as, say, Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, it seems hardly possible to avoid the conclusion that anti-biography[2] is old hat. Biography has proven immensely capable of tolerating even the most outrageous amounts of genre-bending. As a type of narrative, it remains recognisable even under exotic experimental conditions. Even in the less adventurous realm of academic writing, biographies have been

1 Barthes, 1984; Foucault, 1984 and 1994; Bourdieu, 1986.

2 As Nye, 1983, and Edel, 1984: 21, dubbed the delegitimizing critique of biography.

written of animals[3] and inanimate objects;[4] of continents[5] and collectives;[6] of protagonists whose trajectories through the world could be traced only in fragments;[7] of protagonists who were exclusively accessible through cultural context;[8] of at least partly fictionalized lives;[9] and of the afterlives of dead protagonists.[10] It is hardly necessary to add, moreover, that autobiography and biography have turned out to be distinguishable only in unstable ways.[11] If personhood depends on a number of discursive operations – the ascription of agency, voice, and a small measure of temporal continuity – personification is a facile operation indeed. This operation might be qualified as metaphorical when applied to untraditional carrier objects. Yet, this contrast may only be the one between the habitual and the flamboyant metaphor. For, hardly does it seem non-metaphorical when we ascribe personhood to those large, flawed, and ultimately unsustainable symbiotic systems of variegated cell tissue and uncounted micro-organisms we arrogate calling "individual" bodies.[12] If so, naïve realism, whatever its merits, barely applies to the objects of biography, and the exposition of its naïveté is hardly more than an empty gesture. At the end of the day, the appeal of anti-biography might appear merely as the appeal of narrative experimentation; of the crooked story instead of the straight. Anti-biography might then simply coincide with a use of biography as counter-history to a hegemonic understanding of the past as dictated and structured by the dominants of a

3 See for example PYCIOR, 2010; and more on the side of non-fiction literature, ORLEAN, 2011.

4 As a literary programme of non-fiction biography already in Soviet avant-garde literature of the 1920s, see TRETJAKOV, 1972, and FORE, 2009. For a more recent research programme, see DASTON (ed.), 2000.

5 DAY, 2013.

6 See e.g. the notion of a choral biography developed in LORIGA, 1991; or the generational approach in WILDT, 2002.

7 FRIJHOFF, 2007.

8 CORBIN, 1998.

9 See e.g. the deployment of fiction in BILLOT, 2003. Also the debates around DAVIS, 1983.

10 E.g. RAULFF, 2009.

11 MARCUS, 1994.

12 See LEE, 2005 for an engaging account of the challenges that the dismemberment of writers' bodies and the diversity and complexity of their bodily functions has posed to literary biographers.

given society.[13] This would be a conclusive ruling in favour of biography, in favour of the inalienability of its customary privileges in scholarly writing.

However, such a conclusion would be premature. Anti-biography, anti-personhood, and anti-subjectivity dispose of another line of defense: the venerable methodological veto of source criticism. Archival filters are overwhelmingly textual. What is preserved is not the lived life of a person, nor the subject, but text and discourse. Life and letters, the object of scrutiny and its textual vestiges, prove difficult to tell apart. The object, however traditional or untraditional, to which life-writing ascribes life cannot be distinguished with any satisfying degree of clarity in the web of text. The source material inadvertently suggests that living a life itself is co-constituted by discursive and textual forms: scripted reality, as it were. People conduct their lives in accordance with pre-established, culturally transmitted models, categories, and patterns of activity, thought, or feeling. These forms provide schemes of ordering events, and of determining relevance. The cultural model of the *curriculum vitae*, the now-ubiquitous balance sheet of professional achievement, is an expressive example. Biography – as an account of something complex, unified, and extended in time – presupposes an object to the production of which it inevitably contributes. Biography is always an archive. It collects and orders textual remnants from a mostly local past while scrapping still other such remnants. It creates an artificial continuity in which everything that has been retained is accorded its place. It hierarchizes and indexes. Thus, biography is in profound error about the nature of its object and marred by a fatal circularity: it is itself part of what it pretends to study. It ought, thus the conclusion of the anti-biographical argument, to shift its attention to the cultural scripts of "life", the only object to which it has access; it ought to convert itself into a form of social and cultural history that forswears the false gods of the subject, the person, the life, the oeuvre.

This, too, is a powerful line of argument. However, it does not impose a definitive limit on biography's flexibility. As long as there is agreement that biography talks about something rather than nothing – as long as there is some kind of object involved – the genre seems able to bend itself so as to represent that something as a "life". In historical perspective, anti-biography, instead of suppressing such excesses of flexibility, has consistently functioned as its catalyst. In effect, if not by intention – but clandestine collusion is not out of the question

13 See LORIGA, 2010, for a powerful case against the vilification of biography, emphasising the diversity and flexibility of the genre and its theory as it was formulated by 19th-century thinkers.

– the detractors of biography have staged one rescue operation after another, again and again saving biography from drowning, both as a literary and an epistemological enterprise, in an ocean of complacency and redundancy. It seems unlikely that either side will permanently gain the upper hand. Both parties of the confrontation require and sustain each other in solid theoretical-practical deadlock – which might well be the reason as to why both the construction and deconstruction of biography have proved such valuable assets across the humanities.

A dialectical sublation that might combine biography and anti-biography into a synthetic something-else is not in sight. This might be because what is at hand is a muddled encounter between clustered sets of procedures and counter-procedures rather than a straightforward pair of assertion and negation. However, if one regards the situation with equanimity, it appears possible that what at first glance seems to constitute an inescapable dilemma is actually mere make-believe, a theoretical merry-go-round for worshippers of the line that is so very crooked it is circular. Perhaps, enjoyment of the ride is the first requirement for engaging with either biography or anti-biography in a meaningful manner.

II

Another problematic connected with the circular debates around scholarly life-writing emerges from the notion that the biographical object ought to be an object of a certain kind, namely a select and deserving one. Biographical merit is commonly taken to derive from a representative quality the object possesses. For instance, the historical lives of dogs in the White House are worthy of attention, not merely because they constitute a curiosity in themselves, but rather because they contribute to the politics of the U.S. presidency as an institution. The writable life, the *bios* of biography – which is never the life, the *zoe*, of the life sciences[14] – is taken to be part of a reality in which it signifies something else. The biographical object itself is placed under a semiotic constraint. The peculiarity of this constraint comes to the fore when contrasted with rather different historical forms of constructing personhood. In *La pensée sauvage*, Claude Lévi-

14 Ancient Greek notions of life-writing seem to have understood "bios" also in terms of a way of life as marked by virtue and thus endowed with morally exemplary function, as is usefully pointed out by DOSSE, 2005: 133. Yet obviously, it would be problematic to narrow down the understanding of "life" in contemporary biography to such a moral reading.

Strauss describes the naming system of the Penan of Borneo. According to his account, as based on an older anthropological literature, the Penan used to bestow (or possibly still bestow) on their children individual names, which were discarded as soon as an older relative died; the child was then to carry this relative's name, until the next death in the family supplied a new one, and so on. Frequent name changes meant that the person was defined by occupying, subsequently, a number of fixed positions within a genealogical system the stability of which was thus enhanced. The individual was defined primarily by his or her temporary position *vis à vis* the family, and especially the deceased.[15] It is hardly difficult to see that a European-style biographical approach to individuals in the framework of such a naming system would face a dilemma difficult to resolve: of whether to opt for a body or for a name as the prime site of individuation. As a consequence, within the system of personhood Lévi-Strauss describes, the question of whether the individual *represents*, whether another person or the social system as a whole, is void. Although the naming customs of the Penan clearly produce individuals, the representational function so prominent in European biographical writing is disabled.

The scholarly discourse of life-writing as practiced today appears to derive from a set of European literary, religious, aesthetic, and political traditions much rather than from, say, the naming system of the Penan. In the process of developing a novel, transcultural approach to histories and literatures as pertaining to life-writing – an undertaking to which this collection seeks to contribute – there is a palpable danger of coarsely grafting the language games of European scholarship on traditions of conceptualising lives and persons that, even when they are in some traits analogous, express different understandings of biographical objects. It is worth keeping in mind that among the key traditions of European scholarly discourse anti-biography is of prime importance. Lévi-Strauss's discussion of individuation amply testifies to the force of the tendency towards contesting the very possibility of biographical objects. Yet his argument also has the merit of attacking the representational function of biographical objects, a problematic that in comparison with the anti-biographical argument *tout court* has been somewhat neglected. Arguably, it is as a consequence of this neglect that the crossing over from one cultural environment to another continues, to a surprising and confusing extent, to create difficulties for biography as commonly practiced in contemporary scholarship.

15 LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1962: ch. VII.

A few remarks on a number of modes of biographical representativity in European history may be in order.[16] There is rather a long story to be told – and here only to be abridged in the most reckless fashion – about the uses of biography in the profoundly, bewilderingly national perspective that is still largely shared between history and literary studies. This story is relatively "European" in nature, in the sense that it retraces a genealogy of genre traditions that appears to have remained, for all its contacts with literatures and discourses from abroad, relatively self-centred. To begin with, in response to the emergence of certain traditions of life-writing in the complex cultural sphere of Mediterranean antiquity, European traditions of political aesthetics have provided an ever-expanding toolkit of representative personification. By and large, both social particularity – for instance in the form of states, empires, families, or communities of faith – and human universality – for instance in the form of virtues, vices, or passions – came to be represented by idealized human forms. The smooth-running mechanism of mythologizing allegory ensured that anything abstract – arts, sciences, nations, institutions etc. – was representable through personification. Personhood was the foundation for the iconography of emotional expression Aby Warburg sought to capture under the heading of the famed *Pathosformel*. Personhood was also central to European legal cultures, in which, following an allegoric principle of personification, institutions were conceived of as artificial persons. Moreover, at some point in the 18th century, personhood became indelibly inscribed into the tripartite system of epochs – Antiquity, Middle Ages, Modernity – that had come to dominate European accounts of history since the Renaissance. Both the ancients and the moderns, but not the mediaeval, were now regarded as marked by the development of individual personhood over the course of their lives. Distinctions between ancients and moderns were drawn out in terms of this pursuit. The simple, natural, and physical personhood of the ancients that expressed an intimate bond with aesthetic beauty was contrasted with the introspective, reflective, and intellectual selfhood of the moderns, which expressed a similar bond with the aesthetic sublime. In the period after 1800, the lives of the "Great Men" were increasingly deployed as unifiers of national cultures and single epochs of national histories. The salience of greatness hinged not only on the greatness of the virtues of the

16 As testimony for the sheer variety of life-writing in and beyond Europe, see JOLLY (ed.), 2001. In parentheses it might be added that life-writing, rather than constituting a single literary genre, appears to form a patchwork of multiple genres, some of them genealogically enmeshed. The ambition of writing a unified history of biography as a single genre, at any rate, often appears to lead to an impoverished notion of the diversity of life-writing.

individual, but on an interconnection with history. This interconnection, in its overwhelming and irretrievable complexity, was permeated with the sublime, and its contemplation required the adequate, the modern mind. The very practice of biographical writing thus confirmed the distinction between the ancients and the moderns. It is tempting to see the literary depiction of personhood functioning as an actual model for the most comprehensive project of national (self-) representation: history. Unlike recently (and almost topically) stated in a programmatic foreword to a collection of biographical essays, biography is perhaps not so much the "unloved stepchild" of history,[17] but rather a disowned step-parent whose educational travails are little acknowledged.

Much modern European life-writing also drew, more or less implicitly, on Christian theological heritage. For centuries, the theology of the trinity had been concerned with the problem of the tri-fold personhood of the deity. The doubling of Old and New Covenant history, especially in the coupling of biblical personages, a procedure Erich Auerbach famously described under the label of "figura", was foundational for the production of eschatological meaning.[18] Hagiography also occupies a prominent place in the genealogy of Christian forms of biography. Among its more recent offspring were the biographies, and especially autobiographies, of faith, crisis, and definitive conversion that became popular among Protestant Pietists of the 17th and 18th centuries and from there spawned a novel, secular form of biography. Another related theological genre, roughly from the same period, was constituted by the biographical accounts that expressed the willed simplicity of missionary lives as conducted within strict congregational regimes and that primarily aimed at fundraising. Here as elsewhere in the Christian heritage, it was the audience that supplied the key to biography. Biographers addressed the confined group of the congregation, the denomination, or, rarely, the Ecumene. Such life-writing sought to exemplify the putative distinguishing marks of the community in question. It did not simply summarize and advertise these marks, but embodied them. Biography possessed a redemptive quality that applied, not merely to its protagonist, but also to its author and readership. The representational strategies of Christian life-writing tended to be suspended paradoxically between the particularity of such confined congregational audiences, and the universality to which Christianity as a whole aspired. The relationship between life-writing and the representation of humani-

17 NASAW, 2009: 573.

18 AUERBACH, 1959.

ty in a universal mode – as also suggested by the aesthetic and moral traditions around personhood – was thus cast into an irresolvable uncertainty.

In post-enlightenment Europe, an important genealogical trajectory of biographical writing appears to have run from the representation of the virtue of Christian faith to that of such elusive substances as "genius" and "character"; and the nation appears to have come to replace the congregation. Throughout the 19th century, the representation of the nations' protagonists in "pantheons", and their canonization by national biographical dictionaries, spread and flourished across the continent. It expressed a likely transfer of the unity of congregational life-writing and life-reading to the national sphere. National educational models, substituting or running alongside denominational pedagogies, sought to transform their young students into representatives of the nation in an exalted sense. Carlyle's catalogue of different forms of laudable "heroism" – political, artistic, religious, scientific etc. – outlines the field of 19th-century biographical normativity.[19] A more or less explicit militarism, inherent in most European education systems by the end of the 19th century, and infused with the heritage of martyrdom, established life as currency to be given away for the purpose of attaining some greater good. Arguably, biography became one of the means of setting the value of a specific individual's life; and perhaps the quasi-economic parlance in question survives in all-too common phrases as pertaining to the desirability, or the duty, of "getting a life", and the reprehensibility of not having done anything of value "with one's life".

Against such setting of value through biography, there emerged a widespread use of biography for the purpose of counter-history, as shifting to a perspective "from below"; or for the purpose of alternative history, as seen from some supposed side-line. These perspectives, in which biography was usually taken to be representative of social type, have been foundational for much of the 20th-century scholarly discussion on life-writing in the humanities and social sciences. After the Second World War at the latest, witnessing and victimhood appear to have replaced heroism as dominant categories of biography. Yet, the protagonists, the objects of such biographies still personified the workings of the larger system that antagonised them or passed them by. Both these strategies of life-writing, from below or from the side-lines, usually retained the national focus. They accepted the national-historical theatre as the setting of the action; or they shifted from the dominants to the dominated within a recognizably national political entity. The representational character of life-writing thus

19 CARLYLE, 1993.

remained intact. Although the politics of biography was never unified, if one pays superficial heed to some of the broader lines of development of life-writing in Europe, an underlying consensus as to the representational function of biography is difficult to deny.

III

In light of biography's historical entanglement with representativity, the shift to a transcultural perspective becomes far from trivial. Representativity privileges such communal frames as nationhood, religion, or social strata within a confined society; and such behavioural models as sacrifice, discipline, or education. A transcultural perspective requires awareness of the possibility that this representational function, whether one does or does not regard it as desirable or necessary in the writing of lives, may transform into descriptive dysfunction. Quite possibly, the challenge of a transcultural perspective is to give up on an understanding of historical objects as faultlessly semiotic, as making sense in a straightforward way, as signs and figures of other, ever larger historical objects.

If one follows the literature on concrete transcultural biography – and hardly is there an alternative to concretion in this matter – one obvious opening for a perspective transcending the traditional set of frames of representation seems to be imperialism. Empires, after all, were based on different forms of organisation than the nation states that emerged in the same period, and often within imperial frames. In terms of framing biographical representation, however, empire functions in quite the same way as other communal structures. Introducing their collected volume, David Lambert and Alan Lester propose to study "the ways that individual people made the British Empire, and some of the ways the Empire made them".[20] Here, the Empire's institutional backbone and its resources of "careering" fulfil a function analogous to that of the national state in national biography. The question of whether or not British imperial lives saw clashes between, or simply plurality among, different, national, non-national, and especially non-European cultural scripts for biography does not guide the volume. In a way, the cultural boundaries the Empire no doubt contained are not put to the test. What is at stake is the historical specificity of life as shaped by imperial

20 LAMBERT / LESTER, 2006: 1.

structures in their own right – certainly a legitimate problematic, but circumventing, to some extent, the transcultural aspect.

The editors of another recent collection – which seeks to break free from the British imperial frame – stress the importance of capturing the highly mobile lives "that escape the national biographer's net [...] Tracing the unique contours of such a life compels us to see the world as at once profoundly connected and deeply divided."[21] Here, the frame of representation is further expanded, to the all-connected world of global modernity. In this interpretation, the global condition – the divisions and antagonisms of which might be regarded as mere symptoms of conflictual connections – comes close to functioning as a universal nation that enlists transcultural lives, be they victorious, be they downtrodden, as its representatives. With Natalie Zemon Davis's work on Leo Africanus[22] in mind, Sebastian Conrad, in a recent introduction to global history, objects that much current scholarship on transcultural lives falls prey to a subtle normative assertion of the possibility of a peaceful, enriching, and ultimately global cultural hybridization from below. He declares a preference for such transcultural biography that actively partakes in explaining something larger from a more critical point of view: "In the best case, one succeeds, by means of the example of individual agents and groups of agents, to discuss systemic dimensions of the process of globalisation and to pose, in a fundamental way, the question as to the scope of individual agency at a time of daunting, world-wide processes that appear anonymous."[23] This then means reasserting, if in the name of the critique of globalization, the representational duties of biography. The individual life, ultimately, is not an object of research in its own right, for, as an object, it is merely the symptom of a macro-historical process, as, in this case, globalisation.

The very palpable danger of such a requirement of representation in biography is that of drowning out existing and relevant local difference, as Martha Hodes has argued succinctly.[24] The possibility of conflicting, mingling, or coexisting biographical scripts of different cultural provenience[25] and the possibility of the emergence of specific such scripts in local settings[26] such as the much-debated "contact zones",[27] or even in the relative openness and spon-

21 DEACON / RUSSELL / WOOLLACOTT, 2010: 2.

22 DAVIS, 2006.

23 CONRAD, 2013: 215 (my translation).

24 HODES, 2010; and also HODES, 2007.

25 As laid out by the contributions in GRANOFF / SHINOHARA (eds.), 1993 and 1994.

26 See for instance SCHAFFER / ROBERTS / RAJ, 2009.

27 As following PRATT, 1992.

taneity of emerging, singular situations,[28] has been explored in an expanding literature of, as one might say, casuistic research. As is common in historical and literary studies, casuistry presents cases both as contingent situational conjunctures and as representative, if only ever in fragments, of other things.[29] The local and situational sensitivity in such biographical literature is often remarkable, and not tied to long-distance spatial displacement. Carolyn Steedman, in her exploration of the "landscape" of her own and her mother's lives, picked apart an entire, rather monotonous genre of life-writing as concerning English working class childhoods and female lives.[30] Already the modest transfer from Lancashire to South London that her account analyses suffices for introducing elements of cultural rupture that affirm the potential of a practice of life-writing that moves beyond at least a straightforward understanding of biographical representativity. The micro-historical opening of life-writing is a necessary condition for the possibility of studying the scripted character of the *bios*. It is only in the sphere of particulars that the actual variety of cultural forms – the discourses, images, objects, and so on – that intersect in a life may come to the fore.

The present collection finds itself in a cognate spot. Of particular importance for the papers assembled in the following pages are historical situations of the encounter, or the missed encounter, of different cultural scripts for the writing and living of lives. Entangled in processes of hybridization or in plain failure of communication, genres and regimes of life-writing, personae, and impersonations feature prominently. By highlighting in particular – from literary, historical, and ethnographic perspectives – the scripts that went into the making of lives, many of the papers pursue larger cultural patterns individual lives represent. Still, the particularities of the cases are frequently overwhelming, and the emerging notions of personhood often exhibit a spontaneous and idiosyncratic character that also defies biography's representative mandate. Nonetheless, it is well possible that the bounds of biographical sense as established in learned discourse cannot be entirely overturned in the sphere of scholarly writing. It might then be the case that the privilege of a transcultural approach to biography is not that of suppressing the representativeness of lives altogether. Yet, it might be that of proposing alternative, multiple, and imperfect strategies of representation less in line with the tradition that appears to have

28 See for example FISHER, 1996 and 2010.

29 See the instructive discussion in PASSERON / REVEL, 2005.

30 STEEDMAN, 1986.

been hegemonic in European history and literature, and more in line with other traditions.

Ultimately, then, the papers in this collection share an interest in problematising life-writing. They pursue this interest in a variety of ways relating more or less directly to the goal of shifting some of the terms of debate and gaining some distance from the theoretical problems that beset biography: the circle of biography and anti-biography, the representational function of biographical objects. Such a problematisation may be attained by exploring the embeddedness of biography in other kinds of stories and contexts, that is to say, the possibility of its hybridization with other genres of writing; by being attentive to other than textual carriers of biographical meaning; and by pluralising biography internally in terms of both object and narration. The papers in this collection seek to spell out various aspects of such an agenda in different ways. They explore lives and biographical scripts that, in some way or other, ran afield, into an open space of particularities, to be determined only on site, and not by way of a single and general regime of life-writing within a solid representational frame.

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