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► **To cite this version:**

Joanny Moulin. Introduction: Towards Biography Theory. *Cercles: Revue Pluridisciplinaire du Monde Anglophone*, 2015, Towards Biography Theory, 35, pp.1-11. hal-01078127v2

**HAL Id: hal-01078127**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01078127v2>**

Submitted on 31 Mar 2015

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Cercles 35 (2015)

## INTRODUCTION TOWARDS BIOGRAPHY THEORY

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*οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους*  
We do not however write histories, but Lives (Plutarch)

These articles are intended as samples demonstrating the vivacity of research in the field of biography today. Their authors have all published books of international repute relative to the theory of biography. They are either historians or literary scholars, as are many of the academic writers who have defined biography as their object of research in recent years. The biographical turn, as we find convenient to call the renewed interest in biography and biographic approaches that has been taking place over the last decades, converging from several disciplines of the humanities, appears like a paradigmatic debate of sorts, that both calls for a new definition of biography in the larger sense of the term, and generates a theoretical demand.

On the one hand, biography is in part a literary genre, long disparaged as minor – but after Deleuze this should rather be considered as a promising asset. What some German scholars call its *“Theorieresistenz”* [FETZ & SCHWEIGER : 5] is much less a resistance to theorisation that would be inherent to biography, than a resistance of “theory” to biography, due to the particular bend of a period in the history of the humanities, and especially literary science, characterised by the hegemony of literary theory over literary history and criticism. On the other hand, biography imposes itself de facto as a *practice*, that for all intents and purposes seems central to some post-“theory” advancements in the humanities.

In literary science, this has been observed in genetic criticism, studying the manuscript traces of the growth and birth of a text in the crucible of its author’s mind, in New Historicism, recontextualising literary productions; or in reception theories, centring on the reading subject, as well as in various schools, from feminist to post-colonial studies and their many variants, that focus on the individual as a member, either unique or typical, of a given community. The relevance of biographical approaches in literary science

today is demonstrated, in particular, by the authors whose texts Robert Dion and Frédéric Regard, have co-edited in their recent collection, *Les Nouvelles écritures biographiques* (2013).

History has renewed its dialogue with biography when it departed from the long duration, from living history to micro-history — the *microstoria* school of Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi. Grounding her reflection on a new reading of the works of pre-modernist thinkers like Herder, Droysen, and Dilthey, Sabina Loriga offers a very convincing advocacy of “*l’histoire biographique*” [14] in *Le Petit x. De la biographie à l’histoire* (2010). In sociology, the followers of what Mauss used to call a “phenomenology of the individual,” via the participative methods of the Chicago School and Mass Observation, have fostered the use of the “*réécits de vie*” as a methodology in several domains, developing into life-writing studies, which have become a quasi-discipline in their own right, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Life-writing, however, while using biographical and autobiographical writings as both objects and methods of research, has not produced much far-reaching meta-discourse so far, and seems far less interested in elaborating a theory of (auto-)biographic writing than in using it as a medium of academic production. That is one of the main theses defended by Hans Renders and Binne de Haan in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (Brill Academic Publishing, 2014), where Renders further argues that biography, which he sees as distinct from life-writing, is essentially a form of historiography, and therefore a branch of history, thus implicitly engaging a debate with Ira Bruce Nadel, who had maintained earlier, in *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form* (St Martin’s Press, 1984), that for biographical studies “the new model is Max Weber not Freud” [188], thus implying that the theory of biography should take its clues from sociology, rather than from psychology.

While resisting the temptation to take sides in this current debate for the time being, it should be noted that the very liveliness of the debate itself, which has been lasting for at least a quarter of a century, testifies to the existence of a theory need, a demand for theory, singling out biography in the larger sense — not just the literary genre — as an interdisciplinary field of research within the humanities, whose theorisation appears to be forthcoming, although it remains for the moment in a protracted incipient stage. In this respect, mentalities have evolved to a point where biography research writers no longer feel obliged to justify themselves, and to vindicate the seriousness of their object in a supposedly hostile academic context. Hopefully, the days when Deirdre Bair could fear that “Biography is

academic suicide” — “*Die Biographie ist akademischer Selbstmord*” [*Literaturen* 7/8 (2001), quoted in KLEIN 2009 : 113] — are behind us for good now.

The current need for biography theory, as well as the fact that biography today is no longer viewed solely as a literary genre, but much rather appears as a field of innovative methods of research common to several disciplines in the humanities, have been amply demonstrated by the masterful synthetic works — on a widely diachronic, international and interdisciplinary basis — of some researchers in German-speaking countries, like Bernhard Fetz, Hannes Schweiger, and Wilhelm Hemecker of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Biographie in Vienna, or Christian Klein at the Bergischen Universität Wuppertal. However, although they are very exhaustively well informed, they tend to situate themselves in the continuation of Dilthey’s *Geisteswissenschaft* — himself the spiritual heir of Herder and Droysen —, and of *Literaturwissenschaft* — literary science — the very academic paradigm that has been bowled over by so-called “French” theory and poststructuralism.

Much as in the German-speaking world “*Biographieforschung*” is bound to be suspected of pursuing a more or less hidden romantic agenda, in France any attempt to revisit “*le biographique*” conjures up the outmoded spectres of Sainte-Beuve, Taine, Lanson, and Brunetière; in Britain and North America, it more or less confusedly runs the risk of invoking the ghosts of Emerson’s transcendentalism and Carlyle’s hero-worship. That is understandable: at the turn of the century, when the dust raised by the “theory wars” had still hardly begun to settle, the resurgence of interest in biography could easily pass for a reactionary “anti-theory” backlash — and no doubt it was in some quarters —, but the sheer seriousness of the *microstoria* school of historians, and the development of life-writing in the vicinity of literary and cultural studies (to mention but these two obvious examples) should be proof enough that the biographic turn is much more than this. However, the fact that it was inevitably perceived as such — and furthermore the very fact that its own seriousness compelled it to a self-criticism of its deeper motivations — certainly suffices to explain the “*Theorieresistenz*” of biography: that is most probably the main reason why biography theory, like “the dull brain” of the romantic poet in Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale*, “perplexes and retards” its own accomplishment.

A survey of the history of biography, from the days of Plutarch and Suetonius, down to an analysis of its problematic relationships with postmodern theory, has been a *passage obligé* of most essays devoted to the issue. Two monographs in particular, published in France at the beginning of century offer very enlightening synthetic reflexions on the problem: *Le*

*Pari biographique*, by François Dosse, and *La Relation biographique*, by Martine Boyer-Weinmann. The latter focuses more precisely on a so-called “*libido biographica*” in general literature, thus foregrounding the centrality of the self in literary productions. Dosse, to all intents and purposes, seems to have set out in this essay to do for biography something like what Philippe Lejeune had done for autobiography in *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975). Neither of them seems very keen to draw a clear line between biography and autobiography, and that is a presupposition they share with a great number of scholarly societies and journals — witness, for instance, the very names of the International Association for Biography and Autobiography (IABA), or *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*.

This implicit denial of any fundamental difference between biography and autobiography is demonstrably an essential characteristic of life-writing studies. To some extent, it may be one of the obstacles to the development of biography theory, and this may be partly due to the influential success of Philippe Lejeune’s theory of autobiography. Lejeune’s “autobiographic pact” is defined as an equation between the author, the narrator, and therefore the character. He yokes biography and autobiography together under the concept of “referential texts” — “*textes référentiels*” —, defining the “referential pact” by the formula “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” — “*je jure de dire la vérité, toute la vérité, rien que la vérité*” [36], and posits the difference between biography and autobiography in terms of resemblance and identity:

On perçoit déjà ici ce qui va opposer fondamentalement la biographie et l’autobiographie, c’est la hiérarchisation des rapports de ressemblance et d’identité ; dans la biographie, c’est la ressemblance qui doit fonder l’identité, dans l’autobiographie, c’est l’identité qui fonde la ressemblance. L’identité est le point de départ réel de l’autobiographie ; la ressemblance, l’impossible horizon de la biographie. [38]

The obvious indebtedness of this terminology to Ricoeur’s celebrated categories of the “idem” and the “ipse” lends peremptory authority to the assertion. Nevertheless, it is difficult to agree: “resemblance”, in fact, is hardly ever the horizon of biography, whose purpose is not imitative, but analytical if we are speaking of scientific biography, complimentary in the case of authorised or trivial biography, derogatory in “damning biography” à la Lytton Strachey, etc. For Lejeune, the “fundamental” opposition between biography and autobiography would be a “*hiérarchisation*”, that is to say a difference of degree between “resemblance” and “identity”. The semantic ambiguity of “identity”, which may mean either “similarity” or “self”, is

revealing of a problematic presupposition. If “identity” means the self, that is to say a construct, it simply cannot be a “*real* point of departure”. Neither can it be “real” if it means “similitude”, as Lejeune most certainly construes it here: it is at best a logical impossibility, for the narrator of an autobiography simply cannot equal the character, be it only because the self, “always already” a construct, is by definition a process — even the self of the dead, who go on being written by the living —, and as such is bound to remain in a continual state of flux. If biography is mimetic, it is so in the sense of Ricoeur’s “mimèsis II” — “mimèsis-création” [94] — and “mimèsis III: intersection entre le monde du texte et le monde de l’auditeur ou du lecteur” [144]. “What is resignified by the narrative is what has already been presignified at the level of human action,” Ricoeur also writes — “*Ce qui est resignifié par le récit, c’est ce qui a déjà été pré-signifié au niveau de l’agir humain*” [153].

No doubt rather candidly in Lejeune, if certainly less so in the discourses of some life-writing scholars, the crux of the matter is the difficult and much debated concept of the “self”, or of the “subject”. In a post-Derridaean world, as Michel Foucault has demonstrated, the subject is “dead” — that is, the transcendental subject, which one must admit has indeed done its time in the history of ideas. Exit biography. Enter life-writing, or the “*récit de vie*”, which so far has not felt obliged to take any irrelevant subject concept into consideration, but concentrates instead on studying the discursive productions of individuals always necessarily representative of one given cultural community or another. The idea of the self once neutralised, the “*récits de vie*” can serve either as sources or as a tools of academic discourse. The most remarkable practical result of this state of things, as we would argue, is that “life-writing” — *βιο-γράφειν* (but the progressive verbal form makes all the difference) — is the name, the guise, perhaps the mask, under which biography has de facto emerged on the modern academic scene as a new discipline, walking from the start on the two legs of theory and practice, in so far as the “*récits de vie*” define either its objects or its methods of research. Like all other incipient disciplines, it is still in the process of defining itself, in a continual dialogue with its neighbouring disciplines — history, literary science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, etc. — appearing more often than not as merely ancillary to one or the other of them, as long as its defining meta-discourse is still in the making. In this inchoative process, biography theory is striving to elaborate a *sui generis* modelisation, turning for inspiration to various other already theorised fields of the humanities.

The theorisation of biography cannot avoid positioning itself relatively to the philosophy of the subject, and for this reason it seems to have been inhibited so far by a poststructuralist superego, a fantastic academic Cerberus, whose main three heads are probably those of Barthes, Foucault, and Bourdieu: the authors, respectively, of “la mort de l’auteur” (1968), *Herméneutique du sujet* (1982) and “L’illusion biographique” (1986). But that is a misunderstanding, and as such it has lasted long enough, although it is dying rather hard. For, in fact, these texts constitute seminal points of departure for biography theory: not only do they contain nothing likely to deter anyone from such an enterprise, but on the contrary they offer very useful clues as to some of the most promising directions that lay open for it.

This article is of course not the place to undertake a fully-fledged commentary of such texts, but it is nevertheless possible to make just a few pointed remarks, with the hope that their very brevity, sacrilegious though it may be, may also have some refreshing effect. For instance, the stress Barthes laid on the “*scriptor*” and the reader sustains the reflection that a biography is essentially a reading as much as a writing, and that the same may be said of a *life*, whether the term is construed as the biographic artefact or its object — a life may be defined as an *engram*, to borrow from the neurosciences a term that designates, so to speak, an organisation of matter encrypting information. Bio-graphy, or life-writing, can thus be defined as both the reading of a reading, and the writing of a writing. Congruently, one of Foucault’s most productive reflections bears on the “mutation of the subject’s mode of being” — “*mutation du mode d’être du sujet*” [390] — which can of course be understood as the evolution of the subject concept in the history of ideas, but which also leads to the consideration that mutation *is* the mode of being of the subject. Hence the Lacanian assertion of the “death of the subject” — the “*aphanisis*” of the subject, is constitutive disappearance ( $\alpha\text{-}\phi\alpha\nu\epsilon\iota\nu$ ) — which can be dialectically reversed into the proposition that *a subject is a life*: a constantly evolving engram, a provisional, evanescent process. To paraphrase Lejeune, that is the “impossible horizon of biography” if there is one. The “biographic illusion” denounced by Bourdieu is the nonsensical belief that it would be possible to represent it as an object *per se*. By this text, Bourdieu did not invalidate biography or life-writing as such, but the naive and mistaken idea that it could “understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of events”: that is, he said, “nearly as absurd as to try and account for a trip in the metro without taking into consideration the structure of the network, that is to say the matrix or objective relations between the various stations”:

Essayer de comprendre une vie comme une série unique et à soi

suffisante d'événements successifs sans autre lien que l'association à un « sujet » dont la constance n'est sans doute que celle d'un nom propre, est à peu près aussi absurde que d'essayer de rendre raison d'un trajet dans le métro sans prendre en compte la structure du réseau, c'est à dire la matrice des relations objectives entre les différentes stations.

However, this heavy-gun poetic metaphor of the “trip in the metro”, often quoted, has tended to obliterate in some of his readers’ minds the gist of his argument, which is further explained in the next sentence:

Les événements biographiques se définissent comme autant de placements et de déplacements dans l'espace social c'est à dire, plus précisément, dans les différents états successifs de la structure de la distribution des différentes espèces de capital qui sont en jeu dans le champ considéré. [71]

A biography, when it is worth its salt, is exactly that: the study, the effort to understand “the *placements and displacements* in the social space”, “the *various successive states* of the structure of the distribution of *different species of capital* that are at stake in the *field* under consideration”. Economic capital, cultural, genetic, etc... Under the armour of structuralist jargon, the organic matter of thought is alive indeed: the context, the environment, the *oikos* is the “matrix” from which the biographic subjects emerge and return, and to whose constantly evolving states their lives dialectically participate.

There is no reason why biography theory should imply a rupture with the poststructuralist period of the humanities; quite the contrary, it results from it as a next logical step. Just as this paper offered space for a very few analeptic examples, it may yet envisage a quick proleptic glance at several schools of thinking that are most likely to afford food for thought towards a theory of biography. One of these directions brings us back to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey and Edmund Gosse invented the “New Biography”. Norbert Elias used to remark that the notion of *individuum* did not crystallise on the designation of the human person before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, whereas previously it was used in formal logic to signify a particular case, whatever its nature. And indeed, in the 1920s, the Soviet writer Sergei Tretjakov and his comrades of the journal *LEF — Levj Front Iskusstv* : the “Left Front of Arts” — developed the concept of « factography » and undertook to write « biographies of objects ». Incidentally, the « Lives of Objects » was the topic of a conference organised in 2013 by the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, at Wolfson College. The idea that the notion of biographical subject could extend to the non-human finds impetus and resonance if it is related to the anthropo-sociology of Edgar Morin. In his multi-volume work entitled *La Méthode*, Morin envisions



“subjects” or “individuals” as belonging potentially to three levels or degrees. Subjects of the first level, of which the simple engine of the vortex is the prototype, emerge from matter as spontaneous events. Organisms, including human beings, are subjects of a second degree of organisation, who in turn collectively give rise to subjects of a third degree, of which nation-states count among the most formidable representatives. Ideas in general form the “noological” strata of the living world.

Several remarks therefore impose themselves. Firstly, biography theory will have to envisage the broadening of its definition of the subject to include infra- and supra-human entities, be it only to include, for instance, the mainly American genre of “corporate biography”, a variation on the “multiple biography” or “group biography”, writing the lives of corporations or companies, and other collective entities. Whatever its degree of organisation, the subject is produced by its world, but simultaneously “co-produces” it, it “retro-acts” on it in a continually recursive “loop” which Morin call the “*computo*” [vol. 3 : 210 & *passim*] — a slightly more elaborate conceptualisation of what Bourdieu calls the “matrix” of a life in “L’illusion biographique”, which is demonstrably the very knot that biography works to unravel.

Since the subject is only apprehensible as an evanescent *engram*, inscribing itself irregularly in time, its conceptualisation is bound to entail a further reflexion on the notion of “event”. In this respect, the concept of “existential hapax” — a nonce event, just as the *hapax legomenon* designates a nonce word — developed by Michel Onfray [27 & *passim*] , might be useful, provided its proximity with the idea of grace, or conversion, does not reintroduce the transcendental subject by the back door. It may help to conceptualise these moments of special intensity in a given life — encounters, discoveries, intuitions, and other meaningful events — on which many modern biographies tend to concentrate, partly under the influence of the biopic genre in cinema, instead of plodding through the life-stories of their subjects from the cradle to the grave. To some extent, the subject of biography itself, whose life is an *écriture* as unique as a fingerprint, may be conceptualised as an existential “hapax”. As far as the philosophy of the subject is concerned, a promising advancement of knowledge today comes from some British thinkers of the so-called “analytical” tradition inaugurated by Bertrand Russell. Among those who are most likely to prove useful to biography theory, Galen Strawson elaborates the useful concept of the “thin subject” or “sesmet” — “the subject of experience that is a single mental thing” [61]; and Colin McGinn, in his “panmaterialist” metaphysics, maintains that “stuff, objects, events, and laws are coeval categories” [229].

\* \* \*

This introductory paper, voluntarily allusive and elliptic in its last “open” page, where it merely wishes to adumbrate and suggest some possible tracks to be explored in the near future, is an attempt to posit some of the main issues that research writers striving to develop a theory of biography have to deal with. It argues that biography today can no longer be considered solely as a literary genre, but that the factual development of life-writing may be seen as the form under which it has already emerged on the academic scene as an incipient discipline, or at least as a lively interdisciplinary field in the humanities. It further argues that there is no radical contradiction between biographical studies and poststructuralist theory, but that quite on the contrary it is the very reappraisal of the central concept of the subject, operated by the philosophy of deconstruction, that has entailed the emergence of life-writing, and created the intellectual need to theorise biography in this larger sense. Life-writing, or biographical studies, have defined themselves from the start as both practice and theory, the “*récits de vie*” in their various forms functioning both as objects and as methods of research. Remarkably, most biography scholars are also biographers or “life-writers” in their own right. Their current collective effort to produce a theory of biography is a crucial phase in the disciplinary development of the field. It is easily predictable that it will grow principally in two directions: on the one hand, the elaboration of a meta-discourse, that calls, as we have seen, for some revisiting of key concepts like those of “subject” and “event”, and on the other hand a diachronic study of the forms and functions of biography in the history of ideas — a biography of biography, if one dare say.

The articles in this journal issue are not meant to cohere as a whole into a proposal towards a *theory* of biography: that is only the chosen topic of this tentative prolegomenon. On the contrary, they have been selected as sample “free-style” productions by recognised biography scholars from several disciplines, and from various parts of the world, to demonstrate the multifarious, and hopefully thought-provoking productivity of biographic research.

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