Introduction: The Writers' Many Lives

Mélanie Joseph-Vilain, Judith Misrahi-Barak

PoCoPages, 2012, 11-24.

INTRODUCTION
THE WRITERS' MANY LIVES

Mélanie JOSEPH-VILAIN & Judith MISRAHI-BARAK
University of Burgundy/Paul-Valéry University Montpellier 3

As Antoine Compagnon suggests in his enlightening course on 'the author', both the history of literary criticism and the history of literature can be understood and read in the light of how the authorial presence was perceived. The twentieth century shifted from a predominantly biographical perspective, following Gustave Lanson's prescriptions, to a radically non-biographical perspective described by Roland Barthes as 'the death of the author'. Within such a perspective, which developed in the wake of structuralism, the ambition was to eliminate the author, which was felt as interfering with 'objective' analyses of the text. The focus was exclusively on the text, since, in Barthes's often quoted words, in a literary text 'language speaks, not the author'[1] (Barthes 1984: 62, our translation).

Of course, such a radical anti-biographical stance did not hold long, and as Compagnon points out, Barthes himself qualified it as early as 1972:

1. 'C'est le langage qui parle, ce n'est pas l'auteur.'

> As an institution, the author is dead: his legal, emotional, biographical person has disappeared; dispossessed, it has ceased to exert on his work the formidable paternity whose literary history, teaching and public opinion had made their duty to establish and renew: but within the text, in a way, *I desire* the author: I need his 'figure' (which is neither his representation nor his projection) just as this 'figure' needs mine (if mere babbling is to be avoided).[1]
>
> (Barthes 1973: 45–46, our translation)

Hence a number of complex reinstatements of the presence of the author in subsequent literary criticism, including Maurice Couturier's *Figure de l'auteur* and its useful 'Postface', published in *Cycnos*, in which he describes in greater detail his attempt to propose an 'intersubjective theory of the novel' (Couturier 1995: 239). His main argument is that even if in a literary work language does speak, it does not speak in a void: it is always spoken by subjects, which means that while one makes language speak, one also has to let the subjects who hold and are held by and in the intermingled discourses present in the literary text speak[2] (Couturier 1997: 60). Couturier insists that the Lansonian author cannot provide an explanation of a text, but he also states that what he tries to reach is the real author 'as he can be decoded in the text' (63). To Couturier, the 'figure' of the author, 'as a target, prevents me from raving' (63).

Couturier's concept offers a useful tool to understand what this volume will attempt to explore. That is, neither a biographical conception of the author in a Lansonian life-and-work perspective, nor a fictionalized version of the author reconstructed from what he

1. '*Comme institution l'auteur est mort: sa personne civile, passionnelle, biographique, a disparu; dépossédée, elle n'exerce plus sur son oeuvre la formidable paternité dont l'histoire littéraire, l'enseignement, l'opinion avaient à charge d'établir et de renouveler le récit: mais dans le texte, d'une certaine façon,* je désire *l'auteur: j'ai besoin de sa figure (qui n'est ni sa représentation, ni sa projection), comme elle a besoin de la mienne (sauf à "babiller")*'.

2. 'Dès lors que le roman moderne, depuis *Don Quichotte*, *Pamela* ou *Tristram Shandy*, se caractérise par un enchevêtrement de discours, il faut, en même temps qu'on fait parler la langue, laisser parler les sujets qui tiennent et sont tenus par et dans ces discours'.

wrote, but the presence of the author as it can be found in his text and in the interactions between the reader and the text. In a period when the discourses of fiction find a useful echo in those of history, anthropology, sociology and theories of communication, it seemed interesting to foreground a transtextual approach that interrogates the relationship between the text and what Gérard Genette calls the 'epitext'. These past years, literary studies have also known an increase in the diversity of critical approaches and theoretical perspectives, and the present volume aims to offer a small contribution in that respect.

The aim of this volume, which borrows Derek Walcott's title for his autobiographical poem *Another Life*, is to focus on the former lives of writers before they came to writing, or the parallel professions that are still theirs while they publish their novels, short stories, poems or plays. Many writers have not always been writers, but have started their professional lives as doctors, nurses, cooks, social workers, anthropologists, custom officers, stage managers, engineers, land surveyors etc. What alchemy took place before such switching could happen? What does it imply? One may wonder if it is something that is perceptible, with hindsight, in the writing, and whether knowing about it helps the reading, or hinders it, to what extent it matters or on the contrary does not matter at all. Is it a radical shift or a gradual conversion? Is the writing shaped up, or haunted, by the former profession? Is the new life to be seen as prefigured by the former life, or was the new life born only thanks to the rejection of the former one?

Such a conception of the biographical dimension of writing relies on the 'figure of the author', but it is neither defined in a narrow, Lansonian perspective, nor examined merely for contextual reasons. The aim is to detect in the text the traces of the writers' 'other lives' and the influence they may have exerted on the writing itself, providing, or not, a structural blueprint. Our approach therefore relies on an 'intersubjective' conception of writing and reading, and

also acknowledges the part played by imagination in the interactions between writer, reader and text, in keeping with Lecercle's definition of the various figures interacting in the literary exchange:

> There is no communication between the real author and the real reader, but only between the real author and the reader agent, and between the real reader and the author agent. And the author agent in the writing situation is not the same as the author agent in the reading situation. In the writing situation the reading agent is the imaginary point from which the real author is called into an agent author. In the reading situation, the author agent is the imaginary point from which the real reader is called, by the whole structure, into his place as a reading agent.[1]
>
> (Lecercle 1997, our translation)

Our aim in this volume is to try and understand how the real author's 'other life' can be traced by the reader in a reading situation, and what impact it has. It investigates the reader's *desire for* the author. It is, in a way, an archaeological perspective. The author's 'other life' is conceived of as being part of the book's 'paratext'. To use Genette's terminology, the 'paratext' is composed of the 'peritext' and the 'epitext'. The 'peritext' refers to textual components that do not belong to the literary text itself but are included in the same volume: title, preface, notes . . . [2] (Genette 1987: 11) while the 'epitext' is 'any paratextual element that is not materially annexed to the book in the same volume but circulates, as it were, "outdoors", in a virtually unlimited physical and social space. The epitext is

1. '*Il n'y a donc pas de communication entre auteur réel et lecteur réel, mais seulement entre auteur réel et actant lecteur, et entre lecteur réel et actant auteur. Et l'actant auteur de la conjoncture d'écriture n'est pas le même que l'actant auteur de la conjoncture de lecture. Dans la conjoncture d'écriture l'actant lecteur est le point imaginaire à partir duquel l'auteur réel est interpellé en actant auteur. Dans la conjoncture de lecture, l'actant auteur est le point imaginaire à partir duquel le lecteur réel est interpellé, par l'ensemble de la structure, à sa place d'actant lecteur.*'

2. To locate the peritext, Genette explains that it can be found 'around the text, within the volume itself' ('autour du texte, dans l'espace du même volume, comme le titre ou la préface, et parfois inséré dans les interstices du texte, comme les titres de chapitres ou certaines notes').

therefore *anywhere out of the book* [sic]' (Genette 1987: 346, our translation). What we are interested in here is a new kind of 'transtextual' relationship that would go beyond the biographical 'epitext', a relationship that plunges the reader in the experience of marginality, or rather, of liminality, that leaves the critic wondering about the ways the relations between text, reader and author, are mediated. It is not a perspective often to be found in postcolonial studies but it is one that we fully take responsibility for, thus trying to cross-pollinate two approaches and strands of criticism that have not, so far, crossed paths.

Such a conception of the author implies an approach not unlike the one developed by genetic criticism. Indeed, genetic criticism seeks to analyse the text's 'pre-texts', 'studying a work through its writing'. The connection between genetic criticism and our approach is a desire to 'escape the ideology of the closed text imposed by structuralism' (Rosier 245, our translation). Genetic criticism 'feeds on archives', Rosier explains. Looking for the writer's 'other life' or 'other lives' within a literary work also means an archivist's/archaeologist's approach. But contrary to genetic criticism, such an approach will not try to locate, or work on, the manuscripts and drafts of a book. Rather, if it is interested in the genesis and gestation of the work, it will also endeavour to bring in something that belongs to the realm of the un-archived, or even the un-archivable, something that does not necessarily belong to public knowledge but remains an object of fascination—for the reader but also, sometimes, for the writer himself.

This should not surprise, as in *Another Life* Walcott himself juxtaposes two lives and two temporalities, his present self and 'the stranger who was [his] self' ('Love After Love', Walcott 1992: 328). As Walcott himself pointed out in *Ms One*,

> all autobiographies should be in the third person . . . "I" should be known as "him"—an object distant enough to regard dispassionately . . . Everything else is the old zealous heresy

> of thinking the self central and therefore supreme. The true autobiographer will cultivate the schizophrenic gift.
>
> (Quoted in Baugh 2006: 90)

Like the autobiographer, the critic looking for a writer's 'other life' in his texts should be aware that there is no transparency, no simple juxtaposition of past and present selves, no direct access from text to life—an issue Walcott himself pointed out, as Kerry-Jane Wallart reminds us, analysing Walcott's writing as a 'poetics of astigmatism', of distorted vision. Examining the relationship between poetry and painting in *Another Life*, Wallart comes to the conclusion that painting is, in a way, Walcott's imaginary life,

> a painter's life which will never be lived. Both arts meet on the ground of astigmatism, which makes it possible to go back in memory and to escape from the history found in books, a history written by others and which turns race into a stigmata: 'painter and poet walked/ the hot road, history-less'.[1]
>
> (Wallart 2007, our translation)

Bearing in mind the limitations of this near-archeological approach, the blurred vision that is implied when retracing the writer's steps, the critic may nevertheless find it useful to detect the traces of a writer's other life, or other lives, in his writing, either because this 'other life' is a fiction or because it informs the writer's practice, not always with the writer's awareness.

The question raised in this volume, however, is not only the link between the writer's text and his 'other life'. We also want to probe the question of the specificity of postcolonial writers. Indeed, all writers can be said to have 'other lives'. This volume aims to interrogate whether or not there is a specific kind of approach to 'other

1. *'Une vie de peintre qui ne sera jamais vécue. Les deux arts se retrouvent sur le terrain de l'astigmatie, qui permet de remonter le fil de la mémoire et d'échapper à l'histoire des manuels, histoire écrite par d'autres et qui fait de la race un stigmate: "painter and poet walked/ the hot road, history-less."'*

lives' in the postcolonial world. In particular, it seems that the logic that sustains the relationship between a text and the writer's 'other life' works like a palimpsest. In what way does this aspect particularly resonate in the postcolonial world, where history itself has often been described as a problematic palimpsest? What are the links with the former being, does it still lend form and meaning to the new being, or not? Can the metaphors of the home country and the host country be applied? What shapes do the mourning and the haunting take?[1] How is self-(re-)creation set up and represented in the constitution of the text? Does personal history echo, reproduce or refract collective history in its attempt to include or incorporate what can be described as biographical ghosts? Without denying each writer's specificity, the aim of this volume is to look for some sort of coherence in the logic of haunting that characterizes postcolonial writers' 'other lives', even if no definite answer can be provided.

The volume opens with two writers paying homage to Wilson Harris who worked as a land surveyor in Guyana before he turned to writing. Cyril Dabydeen writes a poem '**Wilson Harris: Land Surveyor**', while Fred D'Aguiar's academic piece, '**Wilson Harris: the Writer as Surveyor**', shows how the encounter with Guyana's hinterland through his early profession, permanently shaped Harris's creativity, his writing and thinking. The volume is closed by Fred D'Aguiar writing about himself and his early training as a psychiatric nurse, '**Psychiatric Nursing and Me**'. We are extremely grateful to both of them for trusting us with their texts, an unpublished poem in Dabydeen's case, a vibrant testimony in D'Aguiar's as well as something he had never before written about. The fact that D'Aguiar wrote a piece about Wilson Harris and one about himself, shows that the volume is placed under the

1. A previous collaboration between the editors of this volume had led to the publication of *Postcolonial Ghosts / Fantômes postcoloniaux* in the series *PoCoPages*, collection 'Horizons anglophones' (Montpellier: Pulm, 2009).

sign of diversity and multiplicity, providing many different entries, academic and creative, into a writer's work.

Diversity and multiplicity are also to be perceived in the choice of writers about whom scholars have written articles: Patrick Chamoiseau, J. M. Coetzee, Jan J. Dominique, Janet Frame, Amitav Ghosh, L. K. Johnson, Wilson Harris, Dany Laferrière, Yannick Lahens, Nourbese Philip, Emmelie Prophète, Arundhati Roy, Edward Said, but also, belonging to an earlier period, Bartolomé de las Casas and E. L. Grant Watson. Some of them are writers of fiction, others are poets, thinkers or theorists. They all navigated towards writing from other fields, and sometimes away from it. They all hint in subtly different ways at the relationship they entertain with their previous interests, be they social work, mathematics and computer programming, teaching, anthropology, politics, land surveying, law, architecture, music, or journalism. Sometimes the former life and/or profession bring a tangible structure to the writing, sometimes it does not provide anything but a metaphor. The variety of the periods covered, albeit in an unequal way, from the 16th to the 19th to the 20th and 21st century, is also an encouragement to the reader to further reflect on the evolution of the writing profession over time. Several worlds have turned and turned again between the time when Bartolomé de las Casas or E. L. Grant were writing and the time of Coetzee or Chamoiseau. From a time when there were very few professions to be held and when individuals were supposed to stay in their place in society to a time when each individual exercises a variety of professions over a lifetime and sometimes all at once, times have changed indeed. It may seem surprising that the profession often exercised by writers in parallel (that of university professors), has not been included in the volume. It is true that the very fact of teaching on the level of higher education in English departments, Francophone studies etc, cannot fail to have an impact on the writing itself, and on the perception of the profession by the writers and their readers. It would certainly be

extremely interesting to examine such an impact from up close, but the angle of approach here was meant to be different.

In his article '**The "Parallel Lives" and Lines of Edward Said**' on the role music played in Said's life and work, Tore Holst uses one of the tropes that brings to the volume one of its main axes, that of *counterpoint*, a musical technique that allows two melodies or themes to be played conjointly with one another, sometimes parallel, at other times intertwining or even conflicting. In one of the quotes from Said that is selected by Holst, it becomes clear that these 'parallel lines' can operate together 'without the necessity of being reconciled at any one moment' (Said 2004, quoted by Holst). Examining how they coexist, without highlighting only interaction and impact, is something that all the articles revolve around, in their own way, more or less explicitly, underscoring what he calls the 'barely audible second melody that adds depth to the first one'. The musical metaphor and the contrapuntal structure can certainly be kept in mind when reading Yolaine Parisot's article about Haitian journalist-writers, '**L'écrivain-journaliste dans la fiction haïtienne ultra-contemporaine**', the only academic article in French about francophone writers. The fact that many Haitian writers used to be journalists for the radio or the press, or remain first and foremost journalists though they have turned to fiction or essay writing, is a specifically Haitian feature. However it can help us understand the relationship between the writer and immediate history, as well as what Parisot calls 'l'écriture de l'urgence'/'emergency writing'. She examines this distinct configuration through a selection of writers, for instance Dany Laferrière, Yannick Lahens, Jan J. Dominique and Emmelie Prophète. How is one to differentiate between the two activities of the writers, and can they be differentiated at all, given how intrinsically associated they are? In Eric Doumerc's article about the dub poet '**Linton Kwesi Johnson's Other Lives**', it also seems that his life as an activist is an integral part of his life as a poet—unless it is the other way around. Even if he came to

poetry rather late, his life as a poet is an integral part of his life as a political activist. Doumerc distinguishes three alternative personae, which coexist with that of LKJ the poet—the political agitator, the cultural commentator and journalist, and the chronicler of Caribbean life in the UK. How have these personae influenced his poetry? What respective parts can be attributed to confluence or to counterpoint in the relationship between these personae? Contrary to a few other writers whose work is examined here, it is impossible to separate the 'two' lives of LKJ, just as it is impossible to separate those of Haitian journalist-writers.

In the case of Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy, it is the academic training they received before they came to writing that is at stake, anthropology in the first case, architecture but also acting and political activism in the second. Sabine Lauret in '**Anthropology in the Writing: Amitav Ghosh's Craft of the Novel**', shows how anthropology permeates Ghosh's writing, turning a multi-generic text into an archive and a document. Allowing two articles on the same writer to be included in the volume is, once again, a sign that multiple entries into a world are being opened up. In two quite different articles on Arundhati Roy, Priya Menon in '**The Archeology of (in) Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***' and Roopika Risam in '**A Blueprint of the Self: Architecture, Memory, and Politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***' highlight how writing is an extension of Roy's architectural training and prefigure the author's later political engagement. Risam shows how the novel's 'architectonics' owe much to architecture but she also uses the architecture of memory and neural networks to 'explain how memories are encoded within the narrative', producing a complex web that builds its own space and temporality. Menon, using Foucauldian tools, emphasizes Roy's training in archeology and investigates how such a training, combined with architecture, enables her to unearth the oppressive and discriminating discourse of the society she lives in, calling for political engagement. Both articles

expose the false dichotomies that one may be tempted to project onto Roy's life and work, tracing the subtle and complex interplay of Roy's many parallel and intertwined lives.

Anthropology and politics also provide some of the main focal points in the articles by Angeline O'Neill on '**Unimaginable Border Crossings in the Early Western Australian Novels of E. L. Grant Watson**' and Mark DeStephano on '**The Proto-postcolonial Colonizer: Bartolomé de las Casas and the Turn from Slaver to Saver**'. It may be surprising to find two articles about figures that definitely belong to another, earlier or even much earlier, colonial period. The work of the lesser known E.L Grant Watson reminds us of the impact that the landscape had on Wilson Harris's writing and thinking. In Watson's case, through biology and anthropology, the Australian outback was instrumental in the development of Watson's writing but his novels and short stories also show traces of his Cambridge education and his 'ingrained colonialist beliefs'. As for Bartolomé de las Casas, he is shown in his conversion from slaver to saver, to the 'Defender of Indians' history knows him as. Through the study of one of the chapters of his *Historia de las Indias*, DeStephano aims to demonstrate that he was a 'proto-postcolonial thinker', moving out of his role of oppressor into one of defender. Even if he underwent a religious conversion and trained for the priesthood, one also has to take into account his former career as a civil and common law lawyer as well as his training in philosophy. E. L. Grant Watson and Bartolomé de las Casas vacillated between two lives, wavered between two worlds, yet yearned for coherence. They could only sense intuitively they were straddling conflicting territories. O'Neill and DeStephano take us close to the irreconcilable tensions between lives shaped by opposing systems of belief and struggles involved in an ideological process neither E. L. Grant Watson, nor Bartolomé de las Casas, were quite ready for.

Law and a legal bias as well as a more social perspective, give one more twist to our reflection. In '**The Works of Patrick Chamoiseau:**

Writing in Palimpsest?' Savrina Chinien tackles the many facets of Patrick Chamoiseau's interests as essayist, theorist, playwright, novelist and scriptwriter, as well as youth worker. The fact that law was studied first, is also what Myriam Moïse foregrounds in respect to Marlene NourbeSe Philip, in her article '**M. NourbeSe Philip's Poetics of Justice: (W)ri(gh)ting African Caribbean History, Constructing New Diasporic Futures**', showing how Phillip's legal training supports her in challenging official interpretations of history. Language is at the heart of both legal and writing professions, with its intricacies, its ambiguities, its traps, and its openings too. Moïse shows how her former profession contributed to shaping her writing, taking carefully apart archival material to reconstruct historical truth and social justice.

With the articles by Mark Froud on '**From Control to Creativity: Teaching and Janet Frame**', and Mathilde Rogez and Madeleine Laurencin on '**From Computer Programmer to Novelist: J. M. Coetzee's Other Life over the Sea**', we are led to reflect more specifically on the violence and radicality involved in shifting from one profession to another, teaching in the first case (and this is the only article where the association of teaching and writing is touched upon), mathematics and computer programming in the second, and how such a rejection may be one of the elements that made writing possible at all, even if it meant having to negotiate a schizoid relationship to that 'other' person who resides in the past. Survival as a creator may depend on such a rejection, or on confluences such as the ones shown previously. Fred D'Aguiar has made us the gift of an autobiographical essay, '**Psychiatric Nursing and Me**', to open the volume. Another autobiographical essay concludes it, '**Un seul souffle, la même vie, tant de vies**' by Marie-Célie Agnant. If D'Aguiar shows how it had become impossible for him to follow two tracks simultaneously, Marie-Célie Agnant demonstrates that she has always derived her freedom from the very multiplicity she has been involved in. Her text provides the volume with

a very fitting conclusion, echoing Parisot's article on Haitian writers.

To the diversity of the writers chosen here as the subjects of these articles, to that of the chosen rhetorical approaches, and of the many paths borrowed by the writers to express their creativity, one can also add the diversity of the contributors: internationally known writers, budding scholars and confirmed university professors, doctoral candidates, but also a priest and a musician . . . They come from the UK, the USA, Denmark, France, the Caribbean and Australia. We want to thank them for having grappled with a perspective that was not necessarily the one they were used to having concerning works familiar to them. They have shown with grace and intelligence that postcolonial writers do not escape the inevitable multiplicity at the heart of most writers' lives. What seems to emerge from this volume, however, is an unsurprisingly complex perspective: all the writers negotiate their own dichotomies in such a personal, idiosyncratic way that any facile generalization seems if not impossible, at least, difficult. Yet it can be argued that the postcolonial condition provides all of these writers, diverse as they are, with the necessary tools to cope with the potential conflicts between their dual, or many, interests perhaps in a more subtle and congenial way than writers who have never been affected by any form of (post)colonial or diasporic displacement. Far from being only interested in 'the life and work' of writers, they have given the readers matter for further reflection on the complexities of the creative process.

Works cited

Barthes, Roland. 'La mort de l'auteur'. 1968. *Le Bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Seuil, coll. Points, 1984.

Barthes, Roland. *Le Plaisir du texte*. Paris: Seuil, 1973.

Baugh, Edward. *Derek Walcott*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Biasi, Pierre-Marc de. *La Génétique des textes*. Paris: Nathan, 2000, coll. 128.

Compagnon, Antoine. 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur? Cours de M. Antoine Compagnon', *Fabula. Colloques en ligne.* `www.fabula.org/compagnon/auteur.php` Accessed July 6, 2011.

Couturier, Maurice. *La Figure de l'auteur*. Paris: Seuil, coll. 'Poétique', 1995.

Couturier, Maurice, 'Postface à *La Figure de l'auteur*'. *Cycnos* 14.2 (1997): 57–69.

Genette, Gérard. *Seuils*. Paris: Seuil, coll. 'Point Essais', 1987.

Gresillon, Almuth. *Éléments de critique génétique. Lire les manuscrits modernes*. Paris: Puf, 1994.

Gresillon, Almuth. 'La critique génétique, aujourd'hui et demain', `www.item.ens.fr/index.php?id=14174` Accessed August 15, 2011.

Hay, Louis. *Les Manuscrits des écrivains*. Paris: Hachette-C.N.R.S. éditions, 1993.

Lecercle, Jean-Jacques. 'Lire Couturier'. *Cycnos* 14.2, 1997. `http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1406` Accessed July 7, 2011.

Rosier, Jean-Maurice. 'Génétique (Critique)'. *Le Dictionnaire du Littéraire*. Paul Aron, Denis Saint-Jacques, Alain Viala, eds. Paris: PUF, 2002; 245–246.

Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.

Wallart, Kerry-Jane. '*Another Life* (1972), de Derek Walcott, ou les lettres du mal-voyant'. Revue LISA/LISA e-journal [Online], V.2 (2007) `http://lisa.revues.org/1228` Accessed July 7, 2011.