

THE PROBLEM OF BIOGRAPHY

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, biography studies in the larger sense have increasingly attracted attention in various disciplines of the humanities. In literary studies, various schools have contributed to reasserting literary criticism and literary history as two components of literary science that the hegemony of theory had temporarily dwarfed, bringing back to the foreground again the individual human being as producer (the author), receiver (the reader), and subject (the character) of literary texts, while literary production is strongly focusing on 'factual narrative'. In history, schools looking for other methods than those of the 'long duration' (Braudel's '*longue durée*'), like *microstoria* and *ego-histoire*, but also philosophers of history like Hayden White, have discovered new interests to the individual perspective. In the social sciences, the growing practice of *récits de vie* has revisited the methods of participant observation as a means to new achievements. Around the world, 'life-writing' has emerged as a quasi-discipline, to which the foundation of IABA-World (International Auto/Biography Association) in Beijing in 1999, and of its branches IABA-Europe (2009), IABA-Americas (2013) and IABA-Asia-Pacific (2015) bears witness. In the United Kingdom, as well as in the United States, and in other English-speaking countries, numerous research groups, institutes and master's degrees are devoted to 'auto/biography' or life-writing.¹ The same tendency is manifest in continental Europe, especially in German-speaking countries, around the works of the Ludwig Boltzmann *Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Biographie* in Vienna, and of Christian Klein at the University of Wuppertal, whose collective research has produced

¹ To mention but the best-known structures: the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing at Wolfson; the Biographers' International Organization; the Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawaii with the journal *Biography, An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*; the Leon Levy Centre for Biography of New York City University; the Centre for Life-Writing Research of King's College in London; the Centre for Life History and Life writing at the University of Sussex, where the archives of Mass Observation are hosted.

on the whole a very useful topology of biography studies.² In the Netherlands, the works of Hans Renders at the *Biografie Instituut, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*, and more especially the two anthologies *Theoretical Discussions of Biography* (2014) and *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History* (2016) have brought important contributions to the field. In France, several theoreticians of biography have also produced works of international renown.³ However, although some research groups in diverse disciplines include biography among their objects of research, there was properly speaking no research structure federating biographical studies in France, comparable to those existing in other countries, until the creation of the Biography Society in 2015.

In *Theoretical Discussions*, Hans Renders argued that biography is different from life-writing, because the latter does not make any difference between biography and autobiography, and considers the distinction between fiction and non-fiction as ultimately irrelevant. In substance, Renders further argued, rather polemically, that life-writing is ideologically constructed in such a way that biography *per se* remains outside its field of vision. My personal take on the issue is that life-writing has been both an advantage and a drawback for biography studies, because it has greatly contributed to fostering the need for biography theory, while paradoxically inhibiting it for methodological reasons. The scientific problem (*verrou scientifique*) is very neatly, albeit fortuitously, formulated in a relatively recent French work of diffusion on literary genres: ‘Autobiography today [...] subsumes everything that pertains, on the one hand, to the intimate, and, on the other hand, to the biographical, *were it foreign to self-*

² *Biographie – Zur Grundlegung Ihrer Theorie* (ed. B. Fetz, De Gruyter 2009), *Biographie - Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte* (ed. W. Hemecker, De Gruyter 2009), Christian Klein, *Handbuch Biographie; Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien* (Metzler, 2009), and *Grundlagen der Biographik. Theorie und Praxis des biographischen Schreibens* (Metzler, 2002).

³ To mention only some of the most recent researches: François Dosse, *Le pari biographique* (La Découverte, 2005); Martine Boyer-Weinmann, *La relation biographique* (Champ Vallon, 2005); Sabina Loriga, *Le Petit x, de la biographie à l'histoire* (Seuil, 2010); Antoine Compagnon & Philippe Roger, eds. *Biographies: mode d'emploi. Critique* vol. 782, n° 6 (2012); Frédéric Regard & Robert Dion, eds., *Les nouvelles écritures biographiques* (ENS Éditions, 2013). Joanny Moulin, et al., eds., *Études Biographies: la biographie au carrefour des humanités* (Honoré Champion, 2018), *La Vérité d'une vie. Études sur la véridiction en biographie* (Honoré Champion, 2019). See also *Études anglaises* vol. 66, n° 4 (octobre-décembre 2013) *Lives of the Poets and Towards Biography Theory. Cercles. (revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone)*, n° 35, 2015, <www.cercles.com>.

*writing*⁴. This defines the frame of mind of life-writing in which the question of biography is currently caught. The same author goes on much later with this capital remark: ‘Autobiography was born in 1782, on the date of the publication of Rousseau’s *Confessions* [...] In fact, autobiography was also born in 1971 with the researches of Philippe Lejeune [in *On Autobiography*] that provided the conditions of its modelization, that is to say the framework of its perception’⁵. I argue that the subsuming of biography into autobiography as an object of research is a modelization that is currently constructed by life-writing, a quasi-discipline stemming from ‘cultural studies’, forming a framework of perception in which ‘auto/biography’, perceived as object-cum-method of research, tends to be instrumentalized, via the ‘empathy’ of life-writers for their subjects, to the vindication of one cause or another. From this point of view, ‘theory’ is currently considered as just another *discourse*, to which any effort at theorization tends to be assimilated. With this I beg to disagree. What the theorization of biography can bring to both the study and the practice of biography is primarily an efficient *critical analysis of the discursive strategies* that characterize the genre, including the most subtle cases of ‘serious biographies’ where they present themselves as transparent transmissions of factual truth. These discursive strategies often emerge in subliminal ways, in a zone of contact between the biographers’ projects and the perception of their subjects in the doxa of a given readership, where publishers, agents and media operate as go-betweens. Therefore, it is necessary to attempt a clinamen, or swerve, by defining biography as a generically distinct object of research.

On the whole, the resemblance between the two genres of biography and autobiography lies not only in their names, but there is a radical difference between writing about oneself and writing about others. Autobiography pertains to the construction of the ego, which in essence is *imaginary*, so that autobiography positions itself relatively to fiction in a way that is not at all the same as in the case of biography. Besides, the two genres greatly differ from one another both morphologically and methodologically. Morphologically, biography is characterized by a specific use

⁴ ‘L’autobiographie à l’époque contemporaine [...] subsume tout ce qui relève d’une part de l’intime et d’autre part du biographique, fût-il étranger à l’écriture de soi’, Marielle Macé, *Le genre littéraire*, (Flammarion, 2004), p. 35, emphasis added.

⁵ ‘L’autobiographie est née en 1782, date de la publication des *Confessions* de Rousseau [...] En fait, l’autobiographie est aussi née en 1971 avec les recherches de Philippe Lejeune qui en fournissent les conditions de modélisation, c’est-à-dire les cadres de perception’, *ibid.* p. 174.

of paratexts (notes, illustrations, appendixes, etc.), which partakes of a specific poetics (writing style, positions of the narrator, the author, and the reader, contextualization); but also a specific rhetoric (writing devices governed by the administration of proofs and the necessity to convince an audience); a specific aesthetics (conditioned by the modalities of reception and evaluation); a specific ethics (legal liabilities to which biographers are exposed, importance of public opinion); and a specific literary market (specialized publishers, criticism, and literary prizes). Methodologically, the fact that a biography is always the *discourse* of a subject on an *external* object of investigation necessarily implies that biographers must document and study their topics, form an opinion that will determine an angle of approach, and finally write a *question-driven* discourse in a style likely to retain the attention of the reading public.

These considerations raise two subsidiary scientific problems, inherent to the definition of biography as a 'literary genre'. Is biography a literary genre? For reasons related to differences in the national histories of literature, in the UK and in the USA the answer is predominantly yes, whereas in France it is sometimes less self-evident. Besides, some historians will reply that biography is a form of historiography, or, in other words, that it is history, and that as such it is precisely not literature. There is a paradox in such an assertion, given that history, which to define itself as a science has had to distinguish itself from literature, had also from the origin made a point to distinguish itself from biography, and vice versa, at least since the time of Plutarch, who in his introduction to his *Life of Alexander* declared: 'It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories, but lives'.⁶ Furthermore, nearly all disciplines in the humanities could just as rightly (and just as approximately) claim that biography belongs to their own perimeter: it is literature, it is history, it is psychology, it is sociology, it is anthropology, etc. That is the first corollary scientific problem, partly related to the primary problem posed by the subsuming of biography to auto/biography in life-writing. The challenge is that biography is essentially transdisciplinary: it pertains to all the disciplines in the humanities, and therefore it belongs exclusively to none. My response to this problem consists in replying that I understand 'literature' here in the larger sense of the term, considering that literary science today, after the philosophy of deconstruction, has surmounted the transcendental definition of Literature inherited from the romantic period

⁶ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*. (*The Dryden Plutarch*, ed. A. H. Clough, vol. 2, Dent, 1910, 1920), p. 463.

of the history of ideas, and maintained well into the modernist and post-modernist period by the textualism of New Criticism. Thus, when academic writers, including researchers in the so-called 'hard' sciences, speak of the 'literature' on a given topic, they mean the sum of scientific publications devoted to it. Besides, when academics publish biographies, they are not producing works in the same genre as when they are publishing journal articles, or academic anthologies and monographs. By publishing biographies, they are 'doing "literature"' in the sense that they are producing works for the greater reading public outside as well as inside the University, in the publishing industry, whose market is not the same as that of academic publications, and not the same either as that of academic diffusion or popularization.

The second corollary scientific problem derives from the long-standing implicit habit of understanding 'literature' as meaning predominantly 'fiction'. Nearly one century ago, Mikhail Bakhtin remarked: 'The utter inadequacy of literary theory is exposed when it is forced to deal with the novel. In the case of other genres literary theory works confidently and precisely, since there is a finished and already formed object, definite and clear'⁷. Today, we find ourselves in a similar situation regarding 'non-fiction', of which biography is an exemplum. The essay as a genre, and criticism as a genre are other conspicuous examples. 'Non-fiction', is an unsatisfactory term because it is a negative and keeps referring to fiction. Gérard Genette has proposed the term 'diction', which is not entirely satisfactory because the word has other meanings (like the portmanteau word 'faction'). Equally unsatisfactory is the notion of 'factual narrative'⁸ as opposed to 'fictional narrative': 'factual' is just as imperfect a designation as 'narrative'. I would suggest the philosophical term '*alethic*', from the Greek noun *ἀλήθεια* (*alētheia*), meaning truth, or preferably the noun '*investigation*', and hence the adjective '*investigative*', from the Latin verb *investigare*: the action of investigating; search, inquiry; systematic examination; minute and careful research. For biography, considered as a genre of writing distinct from autobiography, autofiction and biofiction, is essentially defined as a form of investigation: it is an *investigative genre*. In other words, it is a form of *critique* (whether it is

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 8.

⁸ Gérard Genette, *Fiction & Diction*, (Seuil, 1979, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, 1993), p. vii. Gérard Genette, Nitsa Ben-Ari & Brian McHale, 'Fictional Narrative, Factual narrative', *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, n° 4, *Narratology Revisited II*, 1990, pp. 755-774.

objective or biased), that is to say a *reasoned analysis, leading to an interpretation or a judgement*, from the Greek verb κρίνω (*krínō*)—to separate, distinguish, chose, decide, resolve, judge, interpret—, hence κριτής (*kritēs*)—a judge, an umpire—, etc. In so far as I would undertake a critique of biography, it is a critique of an investigative genre, or so to speak a critique of a critique, and I propose to start quite simply by a series of critical essays.

Most monographs on the theory of biography today adopt top-down approaches, and thus undertake to position themselves relatively to previous works on the topic, generally beginning by a rapid historical survey of the genre. There are some notable exceptions, like Michael Benton's *Towards a Poetics of Literary Biography*⁹, which limits its scope to 'literary biography', that is to say to biographies of writers. Very few attempts indeed have been made to study the works of biographers in the same manner as we are used to studying the works of novelists, poets or dramatists. As a result, there exists very little critical academic literature on biography, and most reviews and criticisms to be found in the press concentrate primarily on the subjects of biographies, with very few remarks on the form, more often than not amounting to something like the assertion that it 'reads like a novel', of which it is difficult to decide whether it is intended as a compliment or rather the other way around. Therefore, I shall lead this investigation in two phases, reserving the more general theoretical work on biography for an ulterior phase of research, while beginning by providing it with a back-up of critical studies on a selection of biographers' works. Hence this brief collection of monographic studies, each being devoted to the work of a single biographer, following in this a time-honoured tradition of literary science, and more especially continuing a tradition of works on this model devoted to biographers of the past.¹⁰ However, most of these works were published before the 1970s, so that it is necessary to undertake a critical work of this sort on contemporary biographers and with the benefit of the considerable

⁹ Michael Benton, *Towards a Poetic of Literary Biography*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁰ See for instance: Mark Longaker, *English Biography in the Eighteenth Century*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931); Mark Longaker, *Contemporary Biography*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934); Donald Albert Stauffer, *English Biography Before 1700* (1930, Russell, 1965); Vivian De Sola Pinto, ed., *English Biography in the Seventeenth Century*, (Harrap, 1951); Harold Nicholson, *The Development of English Biography*, (Hogarth Press, 1959); Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, (1971, Harvard University Press, 1993).

developments of literary poetics and theory that have taken place since that time. The point is to concentrate, in each of these case studies, on the generic characteristics of biography, in terms of poetics, rhetorics, and aesthetics, while bearing in mind that this work must be a propaedeutic to a more general critique of the genre. Working on the hypothesis that a study devoted to state-of-the-art biographies will produce research that is methodologically transferable to the study of biographies of former periods, whereas the reverse would be less true, this project will focus on recent productions by contemporary biographers.

The corpus is determined in the last resort by my personal judgement, and as such revendicates a degree of arbitrariness, purely anecdotic since this work lays no claim whatsoever to exhaustivity, and is not at all intended to be a survey of modern biographers in Britain. However, the choice of corpus was partly determined by a systematic enquiry based on several criteria: these are confirmed biographers, who have won literary prizes¹¹ in the 21st century. Remarkably, such a choice yields a selection that covers nearly all sorts of biographies—although the distinction between biographies according to the social categories of their subjects (writers, political personalities, scientists, etc.) does not seem to be the most relevant—from the traditional scholarly type to the innovatively literary. It tends to leave out ‘trivial’ biographies, i. e. commercially produced lives of celebrities, which are forms of ‘paraliterature’, but which should not be confused with ‘popular’ biographies, addressed to the wider reading public of all social classes—the biographies of Peter Ackroyd, for instance, belong to this category. In practice, a list of twenty-seven biographers was submitted to the appreciation of the members of the Biography Society and of its related networks, asking them to rank the top biographers whose works deserve most, according to them, to be considered as objects of academic studies. The corpus of these five critical essays results from the convergence of these three criteria of selection: the opinions of the research community, recent publications and awards, and my own predilection. For each biographer, I have selected those of their most recent titles that seem most worthy of atten-

¹¹ Main prizes studied: Biographers’ Club Prize (Tony Lothian Prize); Biographers’ Club Prize (Slightly Foxed Best First Biography Prize); Costa Book Awards (Whitbread Book Awards until 2006); Duff Cooper Prize; Elizabeth Longford Prize for Historical Biography; Hessel-Tiltman Prize; James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography; Marsh Biography Award; Samuel Johnson Prize (Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction); Whitfield Prize; Wolfson History Prize.

tion, while giving a high premium to texts that are innovative, or which have caught my attention for some good reason.

It is also arbitrary that the ambit of this study is circumscribed to British biographers, the only reason for this being the contingent fact that the project for the Institut Universitaire de France of which this book is the result started off when I was still a researcher in an English studies unit. Moreover, the present selection leaves out certain highly recognized British biographers. Sometimes that finds an explanation in the fact that some of these important biographers, as for instance Michael Holroyd or Richard Holmes, have not published biographies properly speaking in the 21st century, but moved over to writing history books, or works that fall in the category of life-writing in the wider sense, like Holroyd's *A Strange Eventful History*, and *A Book of Secrets*¹². Similar arguments can serve to explain, if not to justify, the omission of other remarkable writers, like Ronald Hayman, or Simon Sebag Montefiore. The bulk of Hayman's work was published in the 20th century, with the notable exception of *A Life of Jung*¹³. As for Montefiore, he is predominantly a historian, and his most recent production¹⁴, including *Young Stalin*, which really reads like a prequel to his two-volume *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, and even more so his *Jerusalem, The Biography*, impressive though it is as such, pertains essentially to a traditional form of historiography. Similar remarks apply to other biographers whose names were on a long-list corpus, and whose works have been read in the background preparation of this study, as for instance Victoria Glendinning, John Alexander Guy, Andrew N. Wilson, or Philip Ziegler¹⁵.

¹² Michael Holroyd, *A Strange Eventful History*, The families of Ellen Terry and Henry Irving (Chatto & Windus, 2008), *A Book of Secrets: Illegitimate Daughters, Absent Fathers* (Chatto & Windus, 2010).

¹³ Ronald Hayman, *A Life of Jung*, (Bloomsbury, 2001).

¹⁴ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Catherine the Great and Potemkin*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, (Knopf, 2004), *Young Stalin*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), *Jerusalem, The Biography* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011), *The Romanovs* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016).

¹⁵ Especially Victoria Glendinning's *Leonard Woolf*, (Simon & Schuster, 2006), and *Raffles and the Golden Opportunity*, (Profile Books, 2012), John Alexander Guy's *A Daughter's Love: Thomas and Margaret More, The Family Who Dared to Defy Henry VIII*, (Penguin, 2012), and *Elizabeth: The Forgotten Years*, (Penguin, 2016), Andrew N. Wilson's *Bejtjeman*, (Arrow, 2007), and *Victoria: A Life*, (Penguin, 2015), Philip Ziegler's *Soldiers: Fighting Men's Lives, 1901-2001*, (Chatto & Windus, 2001), *Man Of Letters: The Extraordinary Life and Times of Literary Impresario Rupert Hart-Davis*, (Carroll & Graf, 2005).

Once again, the purpose of this book is not at all to undertake a panorama of eminent contemporary British biographers, but to apply the tools and methods of academic literary criticism to a selection of these, in the intention to contribute to clarify the specific problems posed by biography as a form of writing. The five biographers whose works have finally been retained here—Ruth Scurr, Peter Ackroyd, Hermione Lee, Claire Tomalin, and Ian Kershaw—are those for whom the exercise of critical analysis has yielded the most promising harvest. A longer book, by extending the investigation to more studies of the same kind, would have run the risk of tedious repetition. The risk has not always been avoided, for to some extent it was inherent to the project of a collection of critical studies whose other ambition was to distinguish these five biographers by devoting essays of academic criticism to their achievements. This other ambition, which should not be seen as secondary to, but merely a simultaneous with, the first-mentioned target of producing a basis of problematization and operational concepts for an ulterior work on the question of biography, is in fact double-edged. It aims to demonstrate that the works of some distinguished biographers, just as well as the works of some remarkable novelists or fiction writers, deserve to be considered as objects of study and research as such, and not just as sources for the study of the subjects of their works. And a corollary objective was to produce instances of the sort of research that could be produced from such a corpus, which could serve as teaching material, and indeed the chapters of this book have been tested as lectures in master classes and conferences in research seminars.

In the pursuit of its first objective, the critical analysis of the works of five British biographers successively as one would do with poets, novelists or playwrights, this experiment is not undertaken from scratch, but after a background preparation of several years in the practice of biography (writing and publishing biographies¹⁶ to learn the trade), and in reading the existing history and theory of the genre as well as related works in philosophy and the social sciences. This forms a principally silent substratum, to avoid anything resembling name-dropping, and therefore the theoretical references are mentioned strictly when these are pragmatically useful to the advancement of the understanding of the cases

¹⁶ Joanny Moulin, *Ted Hughes, la terre hantée*, (Aden, 2007), *Darwin, une scandaleuse vérité*, (Autrement, 2009), *Victoria, reine d'un siècle* (Flammarion, 2011), *Elizabeth II, une reine dans l'histoire*, (Flammarion, 2012), *Elizabeth I, la reine de fer*, (Éditions du Cerf, 2015).

under study. Syntheses and states of the art of previous works have been very well done in recent works on biography in general, especially in the German-speaking world by Hemecker, Fetz, and Klein, in France principally by Boyer-Weinmann and Dosse, etc. The present attempt positions itself differently: it is neither a history nor a theory of biography, but simply a sequence of five essays in criticism. The approach is purely pragmatic. In brief, the question is: What are the results if one studies the works of five modern biographers in the tradition of close text analysis just as we would study the works of five modern poets? Surely such a research must yield findings that are specific to biography, and operational concepts likely to be transferable to any other biography, which can subsequently serve as a first basis of critical observations for a more general philosophical approach to the question of biography. Such a method would not conduct to a *theory* of biography, that is to say to a discourse from above on biography considered as an external object of empirical observation. There are already many such theoretical works, either in the form of monographs or of anthologies, and some of them have reached such a high-quality level that it would be both presumptuous and silly to envisage the possibility of adding much of interest to the work that has already been done.

Nevertheless, as a reader and a writer both of biography and of biography theory, it seems to me that something else is needed, and that what is needed at this juncture in the development of biography studies is a *critique* of biography in the philosophical sense, that is to say a systematic investigation of the conditions and consequences of biography, that would usefully contribute to clarify its definition. The present work is a propaedeutic to such a critique: it is preparatory work, in the form of a short iterative series of essays in criticism, which must be understood very literally as attempts to discern what is at stake in biography. Concretely, the intellectual attitude is that of a reflexive reader trying to describe, and to think about, what happens in his mind as he reads these particular biographies, written by these select biographers. In that reflexive sense, these analyses are conducted in a reader-oriented perspective, and as such it confirms the obvious remark that the writing of a biography is always already a reading of a life, so that the reading of a biography is always the ‘reading of a reading’, and that its peculiar rapport to the referent implies a ternary relationship between the biographer, the reader, and the subject, quite different from what happens in fiction.

Another intuition that these researches confirm is that biography is characterized by a specific poetics, which, moreover, has evolved under

the influence of the poetics of fiction, but also of cinema¹⁷, developed in the course of the last century, to the point that modern biography tends very much to be question-driven, thematic and comparative (parallel lives), and ‘partial’ (in both senses of ‘slice-of-life’ biographies and ‘*biographies à thèse*’), sometimes surprisingly so, contrarily to some preconceived ideas that survive only because biographies have not yet sufficiently been taken as objects of academic investigation. To a certain extent, every biography defends a thesis, in the process of starting from state-of-the-art knowledge on a given historical character, or set of characters, to carry it further. Even in the case of ‘trivial’—rather than ‘scientific’ or ‘serious’ biographies—, a *discourse* is discernibly at work, involving rhetorical devices that are more or less subtle, and more or less efficient. One of the claims that this book wishes to make is that the rhetoric of biography affords a more relevant standard to define different categories in the genre than the more traditional classification of biographies according to the social and professional categories of their subjects.

Furthermore, biography is the locus of a specific aesthetic experience, where purely aesthetic considerations interfere with epistemological and moral standards. That is to say, on the one hand, that the aesthetic judgement we pass on a biography is hardly distinguishable from its appreciation as a scientific investigation, or as an acceptable contribution to the generally accepted discourse on a given historical or public figure, and, on the other hand, that in some cases the aesthetic value of a biography may be self-destructive, insofar as it can be detrimental to its scientific appreciation, or vice versa its scientific quality may be perceived as detrimental to, or incompatible with, an aesthetic experience. The way out of this apparent dilemma is closely connected to a current evolution in the humanities, in favour of a rapprochement between literature, literary science, history, and the social sciences: in this respect, biography appears as a ‘crossroads’ form of writing.

A reflection on the historical causes of biography’s, and some biographer’s, apparent *resistance to theory* (*Theoriesistenz*)¹⁸ will show that they fall into two categories: ideological causes, and paradigmatic causes. The ideological causes are linked to the fact that biography is narrowly

¹⁷ See Joanny Moulin, ‘Biophoty: The Biofilm in Biography Theory’, *Based upon a Life: The Biopic Genre in Question*, *LISA e-journal*. <<https://lisa.revues.org/8959>>.

¹⁸ Bernhard Fetz, *op. cit.*, p. 5, *et cf.* Ray Monk, ‘Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding’, *Poetics Today*, vol. 28, n° 3, 2007, pp. 527-570.

associated to the rise of ‘bourgeois’ individualism, sometime between the Reformation and the Enlightenment, and that the romantic period has instrumentalized it to the construction of the transcendental subject, in the heritage of Christian hagiography. It would be naive not to see that to choose biography as an object of research raises certain epistemological issues, be it only because it touches upon the delicate question of the subject. In this respect, psychoanalysis and anthroposociology may open up decisive perspectives of innovation. Among the openings that Edgar Morin’s *La Méthode* potentially offers to the theory of biography, one should mention the *computo*, or ‘living subject’, that Morin¹⁹ substitutes for the Cartesian *cogito* and the transcendental ego. This entails a radical displacement of the traditional dialectics between the individual and society. The subject, such as Galen Strawson has also redefined it as ‘*sesmet*’ (Subject of Experience that is a Single MEntal Thing) or ‘thin subject’, only exists in an active/passive, middle-voice-like, dialogic and polycentric relationship with its environments. In the passage from ‘chronicle’ to ‘employment’ (to borrow these categories from Hayden White)²⁰, techniques intervene that characterize biography as an investigative, or heuristic form of writing.

Since biographical writing is itself a reading, or, in other words, since its heuristic partakes of a hermeneutic, it is indispensable to study the way in which the reader receives and interprets biography. The plurality of the styles of biographies and of the categories of readers call for a systematic study of the reviews of biographies in the anglophone media. An approach of this kind has already been undertaken by François Dosse for French biographies, and by Philippe Lejeune for autobiography. However, in biographical studies such as they are today, the issue has hardly been tackled, and the need is felt for a reflexion that would approach biography with the methodological tools of the theories of reception, more particularly the works of Hans Robert Jauss, and Wolfgang Iser. In the case of biography, relatively to fiction and autobiography, the stress shifts from the implied author onto what must be called the ‘implied subject’: an ‘extratextual’ mental construction to

¹⁹ On the philosophy of Edgar Morin, see Joanny Moulin, ‘Le Paradigme perdu: Edgar Morin et l’écologie de l’action’, (*La nature citadine, en France et au Royaume-Uni*, eds. Marie Mianowski, Sylvie Nail & Pierre Carboni, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015, pp. 155-163), < <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01131237>>).

²⁰ See Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Galen Strawson, *Selves. An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics*, (Clarendon Press, 2009), p. 336 *et passim*.

which biographer and reader cooperate, by a ‘stereographic’ effect. This ‘outside-text’, or more exactly this ‘other text’ appears as a ‘biographical space’, structured by horizons of expectation, which biographers postulate in their ‘implied readers’, and on which they strive to act to provoke changes. Demonstrably, however, the biographical horizon of expectation differs from that of fiction in so far as it pre-exists in an ‘upstream’ of the text, as well as the biographical space, both being formed of collective ‘pre-notions’ and ‘quasi-narratives’, whose personages exist as ideas or myths (in the sense in which Barthes has defined myth as a ‘second-order semiological system’), on which biography intervenes either to reinforce their constructions, or on the contrary to modify, or even to undo them.

This introduction sums up the gist at my reflection on biography at the origin of the project, which was undertaken with the expectation that the experience of traversing the works of these biographers would modify this initial view of the question, or in any case ameliorate it, and to a large extent it has. That is by definition what is to be expected of a critical investigation. It has been a deliberate part of the method to provide ample leeway for serendipity, for the art of travelling requires that no journey should be too strictly planned in advance, and it seems much wiser to follow Alexander Pope’s proposal at the incipit of *An Essay on Man*: ‘Let us, since life can little more supply / Than just to look about us, and to die, / Expatriate free o’er all this scene of man; / A mighty maze! But not without a plan. / Together let us beat this ample field, / Try what the open, what the covert yield’²¹. The metaphor of the hunt, by which Pope proposes, incidentally, ‘to shoot folly as it flies’, is also quite appropriate to this research, which insists on remaining always well aware that it sets out without knowing in advance what it will find. In other words, the guiding principle of this investigation is rather Carlo Ginzburg’s ‘*paradigma indiziario*’²², for it can only hope to find clues, traces, indications that may sometimes be hapax legomena, or sometimes return iteratively, but that should first modestly be hoarded, until the time comes to inventory these troves in a provisional protocol for further research. ‘Life can little more supply’, says the poet, ‘Than just to look about us, and to die’. Just as it is always a vain mistake to think that one may find the

²¹ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 1734, (G. Noel, 1740), Epistle I, ll. 13-14, pp. 17-18.

²² Carlo Ginzburg, ‘*Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario*’, *Crisi della ragione*, (ed. Aldo Gargani, Einaudi, 1979, pp. 57-106), trans. ‘Clues: Roots of a Scientific Paradigm’, *Theory and Society*, (vol. 7, n° 3, May 1979, pp. 273-288).

overall *pattern* of any life, for that can only be a retrospective illusion, as no-one ever knows what the morrow is made of, so it would be illusory to aspire to a comprehensive theory of biography. Life is a 'mighty maze', and if perhaps it is 'not without a plan', death itself can neither round it off nor retrospectively reveal what it will have meant: 'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of Mankind is Man'²³

²³ Pope, *op. cit.*, Epistle II, ll. 1-2, p. 29.