



**THE DEATH — AND LIVES — OF THE AUTHOR  
THE “SURREAL” LIFE OF WRITERS’ BIOGRAPHIES**

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***The author: facts, fictions, functions***

Most professional critics will surely remember that “the death of the author” was announced in some Parisian circles in the late 1960s as a reenactment in the intellectual world of what had taken place in French politics a little less than two centuries before, when Louis XVI and God himself had been not only deposed, but also wiped out of the surface of the earth, to inaugurate the age of Reason — of “Critical Theory” if you prefer. And yet, only a few months ago, ENS Editions published a collection of essays dealing with a quite recent, but fairly popular international trend in the history of life-writing: writers’ biographies — by which we mean biographies of established writers by other established writers [DION & REGARD]. That such a book could be published by a prestigious institution supposed to accommodate the very essence of French intellectual life will perhaps come to be seen in the future as a significant historical landmark. Is not the French and French-speaking academic world still reputed to be, quasi genetically, hostile to the very notion of the existence of an “author”, the real-life person supposed to be hiding behind the narrative?

Another question needs of course to be addressed. How do we account for the thriving market of writers’ biographies in France itself, a publication frenzy which would be understandable in the English and American tradition where, for cultural reasons which we have no time to go into here, the very notion of the individual or “the subject” was never radically “deconstructed”, but certainly not in the home of structuralism? This French paradox is all the more puzzling as writers’ biographies do indeed establish as one of the major preoccupations of contemporary literature the inescapable existence of not one but *two* authors tucked between the covers of one book.

To be quite honest, the process of the resurrection of the author had been gathering momentum for the past three decades, and we conceived of our collection of essays for ENS Editions as nothing but the crowning event of the author's gradual but steady return to life. Daniel Madelénat's seminal work in 1984, the 1985 special issue of *Poétique*, the Cerisy symposium convened in August 1990 by Alain Buisine, the publications proceeding from the SEMA programme launched in 1997 by Frédéric Regard, the Saint-Cloud conference arranged by Nicole Jacques-Lefèvre in 2000, the numerous publications issuing from Robert Dion's research group in Montreal, the special issue of *Littérature* in 2002, and then finally the selected papers from the "Fictions biographiques" international conference in Grenoble in 2004 — those were crucial landmarks in the progressive relegitimation of the author in the francophone academic world.<sup>1</sup> It should be acknowledged here that a certain amount of courage was needed by those who organised these events, as France had indeed based its intellectual reputation on the doctrine of "the death of the author", thus pushing to its most extreme conclusions the American post-war invention of "new criticism", symbolised by Monroe Beardsley's 1946 indictment of "the intentional fallacy". To speak like the great philosopher of art, in order for a poem to "function" properly, no exterior "lump" could be tolerated in the "pudding" [BEARDSLEY : 4].<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes's celebrated article, "La Mort de l'auteur" (1968), first published in English in a famous avant-garde New York magazine [BARTHES 1967], was to take to up this idea of the text as a *smooth* "space" (which Barthes called "a neutral space"), *i.e.* a space where any form of referentiality was now made irrelevant. It seems to us, however, that Barthes's theory was significantly subtler than Beardley's insofar as it introduced on the stage of textual production two forms of agency which had so far been massively ignored, namely the "scriptor [*le scripteur*]" and the "reader [*le lecteur*]", both nevertheless described as strictly non-personal instances, *coming to life only within the space of the text*, animated only by their capacity to hold together "all the traces" of which writing was said to be constituted [BARTHES 1968 : 67]. Barthes's text is of primordial importance to us as it seems to announce the recent "pragmatic" reinterpretations of textual *effects* whereby the possibility of self-duplication, self-transference, or self-displacement is again

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g.: MADELENAT; BUISINE & DODILLE; REGARD; JACQUES-LEFEVRE; DION, FORTIER, HAVERCROFT & LÜSEBRINK; MONLUÇON & SALHA; *Poétique* n° 63; *Littérature* n° 128 *La Licorne* n° 84; *Revue des Sciences Humaines* n° 224 & 263.

<sup>2</sup> For further comments on this seminal essay, see F. Regard, "Les Mots de la vie" [1999: 11-30].

contemplated, which is quite notably the case in the field of life-writing, as we shall see later with our concept of “transposition”.

For it is now time we made our own assumptions a bit more explicit: we contend that there is never any such thing as a “neutral space” when it comes to textual self-production. Life is stubborn, it always insists back into the supposedly non-referential system of any form of life-writing, as if the phrase “life-writing” itself encapsulated an oxymoronic tension between two incompatible realities, the real and what we call *the “surreal”*, i.e. *what accrues to real life itself whenever it is made to coincide with a set of signs*. Except when it is sheer fiction, as is the case of an imaginary or novelistic biography (but even so), the “biographical”, like any other kind of life-writing — in which we include war memoirs, travel and exploration narratives, testimonies, reportages, etc. — is never a purely citational space. A few years ago, Frédéric Regard suggested that what characterises the experience of reading a book is always tied up with what he called the “author idea”, a complex rhetorical image, or *ethos*, derived as much from what we learn in the books about the writer as a person, as from what we know about those writers’ lives — their genders, political struggles, sexual orientations, social backgrounds, commercial successes, and so forth [REGARD 2000]. According to Dominique Noguez, biography has now become a necessary stage to “resurrect” Rimbaud from decades of linguistic or semiotic “reductionism”, and “reopen” the possibility of reading the poet [NOGUEZ : 121-122]. In *Les Trois Rimbaud* (1986), he sees the author as part of the work, the myth fed by Rimbaud’s life having transformed the author into a character of the work, that is to say also into a figure whose ultimate work is his own life [BRUNN : 25]. Life will definitely have its say in the “idea” that we form of any novelist, poet, playwright, although we should of course remain aware of the constructed dimension of any life. The very possibility of “the truth”, of the hard facts, the “granite”-like reality of the world in which we live, to take up Woolf’s famous simile [WOOLF 1927], must be preserved as the engine of life-writing and life-reading alike, its final destination also, although inevitably deconstructed by everyone’s awareness of the inescapability of the semiotic.

The presence of “context” is of course a dominant feature of our perception of any biographer. Surely it matters to the reader that Sartre was who he was when he wrote his biography of Flaubert, that Ackroyd is who he is when he writes a biography of Dickens. Such “lumps”, we argue, make “the pudding” even more palatable. The work of interpretation implies the copresence of at least two *actants* on the biographical stage, which should not therefore be conceived on the model of a one-way lane, with the

biographer transporting himself to the scene of events. As Boswell and Johnson have taught us, life-writing always takes place in the unstable zone that characterises any communicational exchange: the *actants* are engaged in mutual redefinitions of themselves, which also means that their messages may get lost, be misinterpreted, confused, reiterated, enriched, and so forth.

That is also why hermeneutic conjectures may take the form of what we usually call “fiction”.<sup>3</sup> Virginia Woolf’s portrait of her friend Vita Sackville-West in *Orlando: A Biography* is a case in point: did not Woolf’s imaginary variations — her fictional reinvention of her beloved friend — say a truth that a factual narrative would never have captured? In *Orlando*, the photographs included in a narrative which eventually lends itself to being read as a novel work their magic only to the extent that the spectre of the real presence of the various persons summoned on the stage is made manifest, thus suspending the law of non-contradiction. Fact and fiction overlap, “granite” and “rainbow” join forces. Therein lies what is perhaps the most fascinating paradox of biographical writing: even as the law of truth is overtly suspended and fiction is allowed to take precedence over raw facts, biography still says something true about biographer and biographee alike. One may think here of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, Camus’s protagonist in *La Chute*, whose desire to confess eventually takes the form of a rejection of truth, his adoption of lying being nevertheless defined as “a fine twilight emphasising each object [*Le mensonge, au contraire, est un beau crépuscule, qui met chaque objet en valeur*]” [CAMUS : 140]. Such “twilights” are not wanting in the history of British literature, from Daniel Defoe’s *General history of the robberies and murders of the most notorious pyrates* (published under a pseudonym), or the nineteenth-century “Newgate Novels”, fictions designed after the lives of famous criminals, to Peter Ackroyd’s portraits of an artistic London embodied in the figures of Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens, Nicholas Hawksmoor or Thomas De Quincey. Long before biographical fictions and fictional biographies came into fashion towards the end of the 1980s [see MONLUÇON & SALHA : 9-10],<sup>4</sup> the barriers between fiction and biography had begun to collapse.

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<sup>3</sup> Our assumption here is that the classic divide between “fictional narrative” and “factual narrative” should remain valid [See GENETTE 1991 : 66].

<sup>4</sup> In our 2013 collection of essays, we chose to call “biographical fictions (*fictions biographiques*)” the novelistic techniques adopted in various forms of classic life-writing, preferring to call “fictional biographies (*biographies fictionnelles*)” those fictional narratives which draw on techniques borrowed from biographical discourse.

That is why we wish to claim that Michel Foucault's 1969 lecture "What Is an Author" ("Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?") has not only kept but also increased its initial relevance. Foucault's contestation of "authority" was in fact at odds with the doxa of the day, although he was also very careful to integrate into his argument the demise of a certain conception of authorship. But when he asked himself whether it might not be necessary to reconsider the interdiction of biographical references, his purpose, as he explained, was certainly not to resurrect "an originary subject [*un sujet originaire*]", but to "capture the points of intersection, the modes of functioning, and the dependencies of the subject [*saisir les points d'insertion, les modes de fonctionnement et les dépendances du sujet*]" [FOUCAULT: 810-811]. In other words, to Foucault's eyes, the author was certainly not dead: it was both a referential reality and at the same time "a complex and variegated function of discourse [*une fonction variable et complexe du discours*]". By calling the author "a function of discourse", Foucault meant that the author owed its substance to "a mass of things told [*une masse de choses dites*]", which we take to mean that what he called a "function" was also to some extent a "fiction".

Contemporary life-writing may have pushed this contestation of classic authority and authorship to its most dramatic consequences with British novelist Hanif Kureishi. When he decided to write a portrait of his father in *My Ear at His Heart*, all he could do was to transcribe and comment upon excerpts from his father's unpublished novel, read as a disguised paternal autobiography and used as an excuse to start the acclaimed novelist's own autobiography. Challenging our most basic assumptions concerning origins and sources of authority, Kureishi places at the heart of writing a marginal archive — the forgotten manuscript of an inferior novel by a Pakistani immigrant living in the suburbs of London — through which he nevertheless manages to retrieve from oblivion his father's "real" life. As a rule, do not all postcolonial British writers seek to articulate such marginal spaces, from which the possibility of a full, central, ontological presence has been expelled, and in which "things told" manifest the presence of more than one voice, more than one culture, more than one language? [See REGARD 2010].

### *The rise of the "new biographies"*

In our postmodern, postcolonial days, let us face the evidence: the "author" is no longer banned, and, as we said in our introduction to this essay, life-writing even seems to have regained some sort of academic, intellectual legitimacy in France. The turning point may be dated in the early 1980s,

when prominent avant-garde writers such as Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Philippe Sollers suddenly published texts in which it appeared that although their status remained problematic, those were literary productions in which the self was definitely no longer taboo. Such texts did of course drift towards the fictional, play on various figures of what we call “transposition”, indulged in a nostalgia for defunct subgenres (the “brief lives”, the “romans à clefs”, the “tombeaux” — or collections of elegies), but precisely, such generic hesitation, such blurring of frontiers, was to become the hallmark of the new forms of life-writing. The self is back in the limelight, but has now become a fleeting horizon, with no fixed demarcation lines, produced through heterogeneous — which we call “heterodox” — practices,<sup>5</sup> breaking free from the rigours of the canon.

This new tendency should most certainly be replaced in a specific cultural context. Surely, prominent sociologists and historians did play a major part in the relegitimisation process.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically enough, it may also be argued that the impact of converging attacks — from psychoanalysis, feminism and “deconstruction” in particular — against the notion of a *unitary* subject reduced to the efficacy of his/her consciousness, most probably contributed to giving central stage presence to the complexities of an irreducible, *evasive* self, at war with the fixities of ideologies but also with its own fixities. We are therefore deeply convinced that, sooner or later, the French academic establishment will come to acknowledge the historical importance of the intellectual and artistic partnership formed by Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, who in quite a significant number of texts, prominent among them *Voiles*, sought to “graft” each other’s “life” on that of the other, thus deconstructing gender differences, but also more importantly the illusion of a transcendent, metaphysical self-sufficiency: a self’s life, Cixous and Derrida constantly suggested, is always already written and intertextual. One should also remember here the importance of an “ethnographic” turn in French life-writing, supported in particular by the French publishing house Plon: it seems indeed that their “Terre Humaine” series, launched in 1954 by ethno-historian and geographer Jean Malaurie, who consistently granted pride of place to personal testimony by both known (for example Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* in 1955) and unknown authors, may well have been a significant source of inspiration for a number of fiction writers, as

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<sup>5</sup> This was the title chosen for the Montreal conference of 2004, “Formes hétérodoxes de l’auto/biographie: littérature, histoire, médias”. The proceedings of the conference were published in DION *et al.* 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular BOSCHETTI, or LE GOFF.

Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier have convincingly suggested. According to them, the “lived lives” portrayed in the “Terre Humaine” series also strongly contributed to two important developments in contemporary French literature: “narratives of filiation” and “biographical fictions” [26].

Of course, one should not underestimate the importance of literary fashions and cycles; nor should the subtle transformations of cultural expectations be overlooked. As we all know, the overwhelming presence in our lives of modern mass media have managed somewhat to precipitate a confusion between objective information and collective emotion, and may well by the same token have progressively, although perhaps unconsciously, convinced the intelligentsia of the virtues of the “lived”. After a few decades of a literary and artistic production allegedly centred on itself and its own linguistic adventures — breathing in the rarefied air at the high altitudes of “pure” art — a taste for “impure” art, the sort of production that does not hesitate to brush elbows with “the real” and combine a diversity of forms, started to emerge from now propitious ground [see SCARPETTA]. Whatever the reasons for the backlash, the fact is the literary criticism of the 1980s came to evince a visceral reaction against the dehumanised “objectivity” advocated by the avant-garde movements of the preceding decades (Barthes’s announcement of the author’s death, it should be noted, had been published in a magazine promoting “minimalist” art). Now had come the time for a violent return to the pleasure principle, to the enjoyment of storytelling, implying the return of eminently *human* characters. Some subtle observers of the French literary scene astutely remarked that even someone like Robbe-Grillet had confessed to being interested exclusively in himself [ROBBE-GRILLET : 10], and such critics henceforth started to throw bridges between the “cold” literature of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and the “warmer” production of the 80s onwards. Thus did the “formalist” works of Claude Simon and Marguerite Duras begin to be reread from a different, more self-centred perspective, and retrospectively interpreted as experiments in the biographical and autobiographical genres. The table had been set for a positive reevaluation of life-writing in general.

It is worth noting however that professional criticism did not this time precede the artistic phenomenon of the “new biographies”. The movement was neither theorised nor supervised, as had been the case with the *nouveau roman*, scrupulously chaperoned by Roland Barthes and Jean Ricardou. At best, it seems literary criticism simply “accompanied” the new trend, through panoramas of contemporary literature or through monographs, on Pierre Michon [VIART 2004] or Pierre Bergounioux [BARRABAND] for

instance. It was the writers themselves who, breaking free from the doxa of the day, chose to focus on “lived lives”, be they “small [*minuscules*]” or “big”, and raise the question of the kinship of such writing with the literary tradition. Again, this was definitely a bold move in the francophone sphere, as anything biographical had certainly not come to enjoy — be it in the academic world or in the media favoured by the intellectual establishment — the reputation it had acquired in the Anglophone sphere since the 1910s and 1920s and the rejuvenation therapy life-writing had undergone in the hands of the “New Biographers”, Woolf and Strachey prominent among them.

One might be tempted to explain this evolution solely in terms of the *external* conditions accompanying literary phenomena: the demise of the avant-garde, the emergence of new conceptions of the subject, a growing interest in the “ethnographic”, the triumph of the new media, the gross voyeurism of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century popular culture, etc. We do live in a “culture of confession” [GILMORE : 2], and the recent craze for blogs on the internet can only confirm this seemingly universal need to abolish the barriers of intimacy and promote the personal. But we would like to suggest that this return to the biographical also finds its energy in an *internal* dynamic that is therefore essentially a *literary* dynamic.

This is more particularly the case of writers’ biographies: what is at stake then is the relationship between two writers’ lives and works, so that the “anxiety of influence” between the older predecessor and the younger admirer inevitably implies subtle intertextual games, at the core of which lies the crucial question of literary transmission and appropriation [See BLOOM]. A fine example here might be *Les Derniers Jours de Charles Baudelaire* (1988), in which Bernard-Henri Lévy allowed a fictional narrator and admirer of the great poet to expiate his sin of idolatry and fetishism, and therefore paradoxically of *anti-baudelairisme* [LÉVY]. Such “new biographies” will also challenge classic scholarship, questioning the validity of objective, “scientific” knowledge, which places such works in the wake of relatively still ignored 19<sup>th</sup>-century experiments, on both sides of the Channel, like Thomas De Quincey’s *Last Days of Immanuel Kant* (1827) and Marcel Schwob’s *Vies imaginaires* (1896). It appears Schwob in particular has now come to be considered as a model for contemporary biographers, who relish his irony as much as his taste for intertextual transposition. Schwob’s insolence, his astounding mastery of forgotten genres, his art of “marquetry”, to take up Paul Léautaud’s phrase about him, have come to find multiple echoes in contemporary life-writing, where the author has come back to life, but not as a figure of idolatry. Perhaps it is first and



foremost the “biographical illusion” that is gone [BOURDIEU], and this is evidenced by the work of numerous writers-biographers, who although they insist on the necessity of representing personal lived life seem to believe nevertheless that this can only be achieved through a play on forms, or on the memory of forms, the subject allowing itself to be captured only along what Lacan would have called “a line of fiction” [450]. On the back panel of the dust jacket for his biographical novel on Gottfried Benn, Pierre Mertens explains that in order to understand a life, and “see clear [*y voir clair*]”, the chronicler has no choice but to turn himself into a novelist, while the novelist will discover himself to be a poet.

### *The writer-biographer: postures and impostures*

Much has been accomplished already in the study of the transpositions that are so characteristic of those texts, which as they seek to reach “the truth” of an author renounce the rigorous methods of scientific investigation to favour instead the freedom of a fictional reconstruction of the model. Such research has been carried out in Francophone countries, and in Quebec in particular, where the theorisation of writers’ fictional biographies has centred on “generic transposition”, by which is meant a play on the stereotypes of biographical writing. Much remains to be done, however, concerning the blurring of demarcation lines between essay and fiction, concerning the respective status of fictional and factual utterances, or even concerning the various modalities of “transposition”. Transposition may deal with the lived itself and propose an alternative version of it; it may also concern the written life, which is then rewritten into another life; it may come to bear on critical discourse, which may be accommodated by the narrative; it may also involve a certain degree of dramatisation, as telling may be tempted to drift into showing. The other domain that remains relatively unexplored is that of what we call “determination”. As we suggested above, biography is not only an established, coded genre, obeying or contesting internal rules; it takes place within specific “fields” — an institutional context, a certain economy of publishing, an intellectual environment —, which inevitably implies social and political (including gendric) issues of conversion of one type of “capital” into another, to use Bourdieu’s parlance.

That is why we feel entitled to claim that any biographer’s work implies a specific writer’s “posture” — a word usually referring to the position of a person relative to another person, a stance, a state of being in relation to circumstances. What we understand by “posture” here is threefold: it includes the biographer’s positioning in the institution or field within which

he/she seeks to locate him/herself; his/her stance regarding the writer whose life he/she is writing; his/her attitude towards the tradition of biographical writing as a genre. When Geoffrey Wall wrote his acclaimed “serious” biography of Flaubert, what was at stake for him was to a certain extent his own legitimacy as a Reader of French at the University of York, “capitalising” on the illustrious name of the great French artist. But his *Flaubert* came to be read not only as the work of an academic, but also as that of a biographer thinking of himself as a writer, his style very often paying homage to Julian Barnes’s hybrid reconstruction of Flaubert’s life in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. As has been clearly suggested above, the sociology of literature is of decisive importance in such matters.

But we also want to make it very clear that what we are interested in is not only the *strategic* positioning of the individual writer within the social world which he/she inhabits or seeks to enter into. We do believe that a writer-biographer is always originally “prejudiced”, that his/her conception of the other writer is always a preconception, a judgement conditioned by a prejudgement, based most of the time less on reason or actual experience than reputation, artistic aura. Alain Buisine did know of course who Proust was — the dynamiter of the classic realist French novel — when he proposed to write a narrative of “a particular day in his life”. The biographer’s concern was then to understand the *how* of the great predecessor’s artistic achievement and subsequent access to universal fame. Buisine sought to identify the precise moment in Proust’s life when his fate as a modernist novelist of the psyche was sealed — a desire to see and know which inevitably determined the biographer’s mode of investigation as well as his mode of writing. There are topologies and tropologies of the biographer’s self too [REGARD 2001 : 33-46].

For all those reasons, it seems to us one of the most promising fields of research in the domain of life-writing is that of “literary biography”, as Regard chose to call it in his 1999 collection of essays dealing with the British tradition, or what we now prefer to call “writer’s biographies”. Again, this subgenre has a long history which we have no time to develop in the scope of this essay, choosing instead to state an obvious fact, namely that “writers’ biographies” have known a growing international popularity in the past decades, with books such as *Rimbaud le fils* by Pierre Michon (France, 1991), the three volumes of *Monsieur Melville* by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu (Quebec, 1978), *The Last Three Days of Fernando Pessoa* by Antonio Tabucchi (Italy, 1994), *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* by Jonathan Coe (Britain, 2004) — to speak only of Europe (suffice it to say that a similar phenomenon could be observed in the US, culminating in 1999 with two biographical

fictions, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Russell Banks's *Cloudsplitter*). We do believe that it is in such books, where "fiction" offers "lived life" a degree of "surreality", that may be deciphered the fundamental principles governing contemporary literary production.

No indeed, the author is not dead. Subjectivity is still alive and kicking, and combined with the various events and mechanisms that "determine" writing, its return to the forefront recalls the importance of everything that is external to "the pudding". It may even be argued that the author's point of view as well as his aesthetic options have become conspicuous ingredients of biographical writing, as is made clear whenever a famous writer-biographer dealing with another famous writer comes to reflect, more or less overtly, on his/her own practice as a writer. The biographer's "posture" thus very often verges on what might be called his/her "imposture", which consists in producing oneself as an *alter ego* of the biographee, to whom the biographer addresses messages and from whom he/she also receives injunctions — a peer-to-peer communication which only true writing makes possible. In a "surreal" way.

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