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卷首语

传记 (life writing) 是人类的纪念碑。文化的起源中就包含着传记的因素, 记载孔子言行的《论语》、柏拉图的苏格拉底回忆录和四福音书为传记树立了不朽的经典。其他文学和文化的文本形式, 大都随着时代的变迁而消亡, 成为历史的陈迹, 只有传记以顽强的生命力绵延不绝; 到了 21 世纪更是超过曾经盛极一时的小说, 成为文化文本中的最大类别。传统的他传、自传、回忆录、书信、日记、游记等继续繁荣, 新兴的口述历史、群体传记又异军突起。传记还超越了文字的媒介, 同电影、电视以及互联网和自媒体结缘, 开拓出广阔的新空间, 拥有难以计量的读者。越来越多的人为自己、为亲爱者写作传记, 以保留一份纪念。21 世纪是属于传记的时代。

传记的发展, 提出了许许多多的问题, 需要研究和讨论; 本刊是中国境内第一个专门研究传记的刊物, 创办本刊的目的就是提供一个发表和交流的园地, 为中国传记的发展聊尽绵薄之力。

在一个全球化的时代, 《现代传记研究》是一个开放性的刊物。它向中外传记界开放, 它发表对各种传记类型的问题, 包括历史的、现实的和理论的问题, 所进行的不同角度的研究和探讨; 它鼓励和欢迎专家、作者和读者之间的交流和互动; 它提倡视角和方法与时俱进、不断创新, 同时也倡导严谨、求实的文风。它的目的只有一个, 促进传记学术的繁荣, 推动传记的发展。

办好一份刊物是一件艰苦的事, 我们会不断学习、不断反思、不断改善以求进步。我们也吁求国内外传记界的朋友们、传记爱好者的支持, 你们的关注和参与, 你们的能力和智慧, 是办好这份刊物最有力的保证, 期待着你们!

《现代传记研究》编辑部

Editor's Note

As a monument to honor human beings, life writing has permeated culture since its origin. *Analects of Confucius* by Confucius, Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, and *The Four Gospels* are immortal classics in the history of life writing. Despite the fact that many genres of literature and culture perish over time, life writing has persisted in a tenacious manner, and the twenty-first century is witnessing a golden age of life writing, which even surpasses the novel, the once-dominating genre. Life writing now is among the most esteemed of cultural texts. Such traditional forms as biography, autobiography, memoirs, letters, diary and travel writing still maintain prominence and the emerging oral history and collective lives demonstrate great momentum. Simultaneously, life writing, having crossed the border of textual medium into the domain of movies, TV, Internet and We Media, claims an ever new and extensive space with the potential for innumerable readers. An increasing number of people have taken to life writing for themselves or for their loved ones, aspiring to erect an everlasting monument. In brief, the twenty-first century is an era of life writing.

Life writing as a genre of discourse has posed a great number of questions, requiring energies devoted to deeper studies and thorough scholarly discussions. The *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies* takes the initiative in China as the first journal exclusively devoted to life writing studies. It aims to make a distinctive contribution to the development of Chinese life writing by providing a forum for publication and exchange of views in scholarship.

In the context of globalization, the *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies* is an open journal, accessible to the life writing community home and abroad, publishing research and explorations on all kinds of life writing issues (historical, practical and theoretical) from various perspectives, encouraging and welcoming communication and interaction among scholars, authors and readers, and highlighting innovative perspectives and methodologies as well as rigorous and realistic style. Our over-arching commitment is to facilitate the development of life writing and to bring it to a new level of excellence.

A full-fledged journal requires arduous and painstaking efforts. We pledge to consistently aim for progress through consistent learning, reflection, and improvement. We also appeal to dear friends in the life writing community at home and abroad and devotees of life writing for your support, attention and participation. Your talents and wisdom are the most powerful assurance of our success. We are looking forward to your help!

The Editorial Board of *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies*

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Reflections on Biography and Its Theory: An Interview with Joanny Anne Moulin

Tang Xiumin

Interviewee: Joanny Anne Moulin is Professor of English Studies at Aix-Marseille Université, and a Senior Member of the Institut Universitaire de France. He is President of the Biography Society (<http://biographysociety.org>), founded in 2015 to foster the development of the theory and practice of biography, as well as to promote academic research and teaching in biography studies. He is also a biographer, having published five biographies with several French publishers. His current research project is available on “HAL Archives ouvertes”; it aims to produce a contribution to the theory of biography based on the critical analysis of a corpus of contemporary biographers’ works.

Interviewer: Tang Xiumin is Professor of English in School of Liberal Arts at Nanjing University of Information Engineering, China, Editor on the *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies*, Adjunct Senior Researcher at SJTU Center for Life Writing, and Deputy Secretary General of the Biography Society of China. She is the author of *Lytton Strachey and “the New Biography”: A Historical-Cultural Study* (2010) and the major author of *The Development of British Biography* (2012). She is currently working on a critical book on biography.

标题: 传记及其理论的反思: 乔安妮·安·穆兰教授访谈

受访者: 乔安妮·安·穆兰, 现任法国艾克斯·马赛大学英文教授, 法兰西大学研究院院士, 欧洲传记学会 (<http://biographysociety.org>) 会长。该学会成立于 2015 年, 旨在促进传记理论与实践的发展和传记学领域的学术研究与教学工作。穆兰也是传记作家, 曾在法国多家出版社出版过五部传记。在研项目: “HAL Archives ouvertes”, 旨在对当代传记作家的作品语料库批判分析的基础上研究传记理论。

采访者: 唐岫敏, 南京信息工程大学英语教授, 《现代传记研究》编辑,

上海交通大学传记中心兼职研究员，中国传记文学学会副秘书长。著有《斯特拉奇与“新传记”》（2010），《英国传记发展史》（2012）的第一作者。

Joanny Anne Moulin is the fourth French scholar that the *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies* welcomes. While Philippe Lejeune and the other two scholars address autobiography, diary and literary biography in their articles, Moulin, in the interview, gives a comprehensive and seminal reflection on biography and the theory, insightful especially with his own life writing experience. The email interview was conducted in April 2018.

Tang Xiumin(TX): *Biographers usually don't talk much about theories. They prefer to talk about influence. As a biographer and as a biography scholar, what do you think of theories in regard to life writing?*

Joanny Anne Moulin(JM): Biographers, like most writers, are not generally fond of literary theory and literary criticism, which can all too easily make them feel like pigs in a bacon factory. Besides, some people repeatedly argue, especially in Great Britain and the United States, that the current demands for a theory of biography are misconceived, as if biography was essentially incompatible with theory, and therefore should be left untheorized. This sort of argument is really a vestige of the so-called “theory wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, and it rests on a confusion between literary theory, which is, with literary history and literary criticism, one of the three modes of expression of literary science, and “French theory”, which has been a moment and a current in the history of ideas, quasi-synonymous with “post-structuralism” in the English-speaking world. It can also be roughly equated with what Richard Rorty has called the “linguistic turn” in the humanities, from Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction that challenges the notion of transcendence as “logocentric”, to Jacques Lacan’s contention that “the unconscious is structured like a language”, to Michel Foucault’s demonstration that political power is fundamentally “discourse”. In many universities around the world, this has led to a radically decontextualized and text-centred approach to literature, based on the idea that language alienates us from the real. Because of this historical situation in literary studies, and also because at the same time history as an academic discipline favoured the “long duration”, with the social historians and the Annales school, biography remained very much outside the field of vision of academic research. It returned by the back

door, if I may say, with the Italian school of *microstoria* around Carlo Ginzburg, and the rise of autobiography studies after Philippe Lejeune's 1975 *Autobiographical Pact*, and the development, especially in the USA to begin with, of life writing as an academic discipline. The theory of autobiography and autofiction has been abundantly developed in the last decades of the twentieth century, but we keep feeling that it does not satisfactorily account for biography. As a biography scholar, I have tried to understand why. As a biographer, I have acquired the conviction that to write about oneself and to write about some other person are two very different forms of writing. Besides, I am certain that the development of relevant biography theory and serious biography criticism are not only unavoidable, but also that they will be beneficial to biography.

TX: *Speaking of Michel Foucault, you mentioned in your essay "The Life Effect" that he made clear the idea for his anthology "La vie des hommes infâmes" that "this is not a book of history". Then what is it? Could you elaborate on it? What made him turn to portraiture writing, or "nouvelles" writing?*

JM: That is true. Foucault explains that his "Lives of Infamous Men" (1977, reprinted in *Dits et Écrits* vol.III in 1994) is not a book of history, and he adds that it is "an anthology of lives". I think that, to begin with, he is saying the same thing as Plutarch, in the preface to his "Life of Alexander": "we are not writing histories, but lives", thus insisting on the difference between biography and history. Furthermore, Foucault says that the best term he can think of for his "lives" is "*nouvelles*", which in French means both "short stories" and "news" (in the journalistic sense: "*lire les nouvelles*" means to read the newspapers), and Foucault insists on this "double reference": "to the brevity of the narrative and to the reality of the events related". He goes on to say that, although these lives are different from history, they are also different from literature, saying: "they have stricken more chords in me than what is usually called literature". Foucault's criteria are (1) that these are personages who have really existed, (2) that their lives were obscure and unfortunate (therefore both "*infâme*" or infamous and not famous), (3) told as briefly as possible, (4) in narratives that are not pathetic anecdotes, but "which have really been part of" these existences, and (5) that these related lives produce once again "a certain effect of beauty mixed with terror" (which incidentally is not very far from Burke's sublime). Therefore, says Foucault, he has "banished anything like imagination or literature" from his writing, he

“has taken care that” these texts “be always in the greatest possible number of rapports with reality, not only by referring to it, but by playing a part in it”—that they “participate to a staging of the real” (“*une dramaturgie du réel*”). What I find extremely interesting in this text is that Foucault is defining the writing of biographies as *the writing of the lives of real human beings other than himself*, and he is saying that it is *not history*, that it is *not literature*, and even more importantly that it is *not imagination*, that is to say *not fiction*. Like Gérard Genette in *Fiction and Diction* (1991), Michel Foucault is insisting that there exists such a thing as a non-fictional mode of writing, and he is explaining that biography, the writing of lives as he conceives of it here, is an example of such non-fictional writing. These texts are *not fiction* primarily because it was *not the intention of the author to use his imagination*, but on the contrary the author “has taken care that” (“*j’ai tenu à ce que ...*”) these texts be oriented towards *reality* in every possible way. That is where I think that Foucault is crucial for the theory of biography. It seems paradoxical, because some of those who have taken him as a figurehead, and also some of his detractors, see him as the paragon of so-called “post-structuralism” and “French theory”. However, in a 1982 conference entitled “*La parrêsia*”, he returns once again to several authors among the ancient Greeks, and especially the Cynics, to study this concept of *parrêsia*: an action by which “one makes certain verifications to be very sure that one is able to *alêtheuein*, to say the truth”. Therefore “*parrêsia* is the necessary instrument, which, in the other, enables me to know myself”. In other words, the Socratic “*gnôti seauton*”, or “to know who you are, demands that there be some other one, someone else who has *parrêsia*, who uses *parrêsia* to say in fact in what order of the world one finds oneself placed”. This is a central preoccupation in Foucault’s philosophy, especially in his last lectures at the Collège de France, published posthumously in *Le courage de la vérité*, and more particularly his “Leçon du 29 février 1984”, where he speaks of “the theme of life as the scandal of truth, or of the style of life, of the form of life as the place of emergence of truth (the *bios* as *alethurgia*)”. The concept of “*alethurgia*”, related to “*parrêsia*”, designates “the production of truth, the act by which truth manifests itself”.

TX: *It seems that the concept of “literary truth” is somewhat tricky. Some auto/biographers make use of it for neglecting authenticity. What do you think of literary truth, literal truth and biographical truth in life writing?*

JM: I would say that it is not just the concept of “literary truth”, but the concept of “truth”, which is tricky indeed. Moreover, it is especially tricky for us today, because we are living in a period of the history of ideas when the concept of truth is particularly problematic. It is a central issue in biography studies, in so far as many of those who work on autobiography and memoirs or on biofiction will argue that there is no such thing as literal truth, biographical truth, or even factual truth, because all human experience is mediatized by language, and therefore every expression of “truth” or “fact” is always already fiction. That is a sterile debate. It amounts to a variant on the liar’s paradox, well-known in all undergraduate philosophy classes. If the statement “every text is fiction” is true, then it is a fiction and therefore not true, but if it is false, then it is true. It is a piece of nonsense, but it is very hard-nosed nonsense, and I would add that it is dangerous nonsense, because it amounts to a belief that there is no such thing as scientific or historical truth, and therefore it means to grant absolute primacy to opinion over critical judgement. Taken at face value, this would spell the end of philosophy, the end of science, and the end of justice. Incidentally, this is the more or less explicit position of some of the voices against the theory of biography, the argument being that, indeed, if there is no difference between facts and fiction, then biography is a form of fiction, therefore there is no need for a specific theory of biography. The denial of any difference between facts and fiction is an absolute form of negationism, which I understand as “*négationnisme*”, defined by the French historian Henri Rousso in 1987, and again in 2007 in the Faurisson vs. Badinter trial, as the denial of historical facts, and in particular facts related to crimes against humanity in World War II. In France, this is made an offence by several laws, the latest being the Gayssot Act of 1990, which in turn is criticized as an encroachment upon the freedom of opinion and the freedom of speech. Currently, the French Assemblée Nationale is preparing to vote a “law relative to the fight against false news” (“*proposition de loi relative à la lutte contre les fausses informations*”), revisiting a law of 1881 on the freedom of the press, already modified several times since the beginning of the century, to repress the propagation of fake news. From negationism as the negation of *some facts*, to negationism as the negation of *facts*, there is only one little step, which has the glitter of intellectual hype. But here we are caught in a dangerous confusion. On the one hand, we have a purely epistemological position claiming that absolute truth is at best an

idealistic delusion, therefore it is impossible to establish any “fact” with absolute objectivity, and there is always an element of fiction in our perception of facts. Granted. But on the other hand, we have ideologues and political activists who are using this philosophical position as intellectual validation to practise “post-truth politics”, contending that there is nothing but “alternative facts”, since every statement is always already “discourse”. In other words, once it is admitted that there is no difference between fact and fiction, then all human knowledge is always the provisional result of an endless battle of opinions. In these matters, we are witnessing a paradoxical convergence of highbrow and lowbrow negationists: apologists of the anti-logocentric paradigm and cynical demagogues of all trades—although these two sets of relativists are sometimes poles apart in the ideological landscape—agree that so-called “truth” is always already a construct. But you ask me what I think of biographical truth in life writing. Let me give you an example. The English writer Peter Ackroyd, recognized for his fiction and non-fiction alike, asserts that “there has never been any distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘fact’.” If this is not post-factual discourse, then what is? True, this is what Ackroyd says, not what he does: his biographies have nothing to do with fiction as such. To answer your question on “literary truth”, I would say that one good example of literary truth is Ackroyd’s notion of “Englishness”, as well as the “geniuses” or great men that his biographies celebrate in neo-vintage Romantic fashion. In other words, these literary truths can be understood as “the products of the human mind”, which people Karl Popper’s “world 3”, or the “noosphere” of Vernadsky and Teilhard de Chardin. They are “fictions”, but these fictions, these ideas, these myths have a real life of their own, as French anthropologist Edgar Morin maintains in his six-volume opus *La méthode*. Like Foucault’s “lives” they play a part in reality: they “retro-act” on it in a loop. But the fact that man-made myths have an impact on reality does not mean that real human beings exist only on the same “noological” or fictional plane as these myths.

TX: *Can forms realize the genuine portrait of the subject?*

JM: The simple answer to this question is no, of course. A form, or a portrait, whether it is painted, written, photographed or filmed, is always necessarily a representation, and cannot be a genuine, that is to say an exact, likeness of a human being. But I would like to respond to your choice of the word “subject”. Back in the 1920s, in the Soviet Union, a group of avant-garde writers formed the *Novyi Levy Front*

Iskusstv (New LEF, or New Left Front of the Art), and among them Sergei Tretyakov, theorized the “biographies of things”, writing “biographies” of non-human objects like raw materials or manufactured objects. These “factographists”, as they called themselves, may be seen as precursors of the biographers of cities, for example. This had something to do with Marx’s reversal of Hegel’s dialectic, which considered history as a “process without a subject”. In this perspective, while the “sciences of man” became the “social sciences”, any human subject tended to be perceived as an object, more or less representative of a category or a class, entirely determined by social and cultural forces. That was still the outlook of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for whom to write a biography partook of an “illusion”, as preposterous as to describe a journey on the underground without taking the whole map into account. The problem with Bourdieu’s “biographical illusion” is that its radical anti-individualism is fundamentally mistaken; his metaphor is a fiction that warps the facts. We human being do not live our lives merely as bodies transported in a train—the automatic, driverless train of social history. We are subjects. Human beings are “living subjects”, not only passively produced by their world—their *Lebenswelt* as Husserl used to say, their milieu, their *oikos* (which is not at all like a railway network to which the train passengers can change nothing)—but also actively co-producing it, in a recursive interactive loop that runs on, like an engine or a vortex, as long as the subject is alive. I think that a biography, rather than trying to make a “portrait”—because the metaphor of painting or photography implies a motionless image—is attempting to capture something of the active-passive process by which human beings interact with their milieus; this dynamic co-producing process, unfolding in time, that is what we call *a life*. So, I suspect that the primary reason why we write and why we read biographies is not so much to have a plausibly authentic finished image of the subject, but rather to find inspiration by dialectical comparison with our own lives, and to derive both “delight” and “instruction”, as Samuel Johnson used to say in a 1750 essay for *The Rambler* (No.60), by studying “those parallel circumstances and kindred images, to which we readily conform our minds”, which “are, above all other writings, to be found in narratives of the lives of particular persons”.

TX: Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes *is a text that autobiography studies cannot avoid. The form is quite innovative. Though in a way it resembles life itself, do you think an autobiography can be deconstructively structured*

like that? Don't you think that the form is too fragmented regarding the presentation of the self?

JM: Yes indeed, it is too fragmented to make what you would call a "genuine portrait" of the self, but I am convinced that Barthes did it on purpose, precisely to avoid the closure that a narrative biography implies. Closure must be understood both as limitation and as construction. In 2015, Tiphaine Samoyault published a biography of Roland Barthes: a big book, commissioned by Barthes's publishers, Éditions du Seuil, who own the writer's archives. It is very well documented, beautifully written, full of illustrations, exhaustive—but the exhaustiveness is precisely what Barthes did not want, because, if I may put it that way, it encloses him in a *self*, which is a "construct", that is to say an *object*, rather than a *subject*: a *finished object*, rather than a *living subject*. It is well known that the key to what Barthes did in his 1975 *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* is to be found in the preface of a book he had published four years before, in 1971: *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. The book is a little like Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, and in a seminal preface Barthes explains that "the Text" (with a capital T, meaning any text, the text *qua* text) is "destroyer of all subject". The Text, says Barthes, "contains a subject", but "that subject is dispersed, somewhat like the ashes we strew into the wind after death". And he contrasts "the urn and the stone, strong closed objects", with "the bursts of memory", and "a few furrows of past life". The problem is that the "strong closed objects", like the continuous narrative of a book, or a portrait, are images, representations, portraits of the self, that displace, and in fact replace the subject. To put it differently, the subject is "a truth" that the text hides, although it is still possible, by reading and rereading the texts, to catch some glimpses, to guess some disparate aspects of what the subject must have been, through "a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections", which Barthes proposes to call "biographemes" ("*biographèmes*"). The neologism is coined on "grapheme", a concept which, in linguistics, designates the smallest component of a writing system. It implies that a life (whether it is a life being lived or a life being written) is a *writing*, or what Derrida called "*une écriture*", that is to say basically a process, or a *trace*. Barthes continues by saying that it is essentially mobile and "beyond any fate", never circumscribed to any "*fatum*" or entirely enclosed in any destiny. He then compares these *biographemes* to the atoms in the philosophy of Epicurus: minute components of all matter that move constantly in one direction or another, and

sometimes swerve, in sudden “hiccoughs”, etc. This constant movement, this flux, is an implicit metaphor of the *subject* (as distinct from the *self*). A biography is then ideally a “flow of images” that strive to give some idea of what the subject must have been. Clearly, in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, this is what he’s been trying to put into practice, writing his autobiography as a collection of fragments, pictures, small paragraphs, which do not add up to an overall portrait. But you are right: it is “too fragmented”, that is to say that we are under the impression that it is a smoke screen; that it is in fact a non-autobiography, like the non-anniversaries in *Alice in Wonderland*. Many writers, like Barthes, refuse to have their lives written. Some, like T.S. Eliot, leave a last will and testament forbidding anyone to write their biography. Others, like Dickens, destroy their correspondence. Others still, like Barthes, write autobiographies or memoirs in an attempt to retain mastery over their own life story, and some of them theorize the impossibility, and even the iniquity of biography, like Freud, for instance, or like Proust in his *Contre Sainte Beuve*, claiming that it made no sense to attempt to write the biography of writers, or to turn to their lives the better to understand their works, because, said Proust, “a book is the produce of another me than the one we manifest in our habits, in society, in our lives”.

TX: *The concept of “life writing” is controversial. Historians prefer to use “biography” instead. What is your stand?*

JM: How am I to avoid entering the controversy? I do not forget that this is the *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies*. How could I criticize life writing here without breaking the rules of hospitality? Allow me to play my joker by saying that I am French. For, in France, “life writing” does not exist as such, or rather it is circumscribed to the study of “*récits de vie*” in certain social sciences, especially in sociology, and it is not at all the same thing, and anyway it is not much done any more. Likewise, we do have some “*études culturelles*”, but that is nothing like “cultural studies”. The fact is, “life writing” is very much an American thing, it is an invention of “*les anglo-saxons*”, and as such we make it a point of honour not to take it too seriously, because, you know how the saying goes: “the British and the American think the whole world speaks English, but the French think the whole world *should* speak French”. More seriously, if I may, some time ago in a conference in Britain, an American interlocutor said to me that life-writing was the Trojan horse that had reintroduced biography in academia. I replied that I think it is rather the Jonas whale that

swallowed it up in the process. On the face of it, as “life” is “*bios*” and as “writing” means “*graphein*”, “life-writing” is the English for “biography”. But when life writing institutionalized itself as an academic specialty, it defined its field of research very broadly as encompassing biography together with autobiography, and memoirs and all that sort of thing. One quick look around at the various websites of most life-writing centres, especially in the English-speaking world, shows that “life writing” designates alternately the method and the object of research, and that the definition of this object is such that it makes no clear epistemological distinction either between biography and autobiography, or between fiction and non-fiction. Moreover, any suggestion that one should distinguish between self and other, or between fact and fiction, is bound, more often than not, to trigger off a controversy, which is always a sure sign that we are crossing the boundary between reason and passion, or between scientific debate and ideological polemic. It is my conviction that the refusal of most “life writers” to take this distinction into serious consideration constitutes a scientific problem—what we call “*un verrou scientifique*”—to the theorization of biography.

TX: *Three of your ideas or biographical visions are striking. One, about transnational biography. You have touched upon such an issue as the reception of a biography in another national community. You think for the sake of readership a biography for one nation should have different narratives for another. This has something to do not only with life writing but also with life translating, I think. Could you elaborate on this notion?*

JM: At one level, the idea of transnational biography is related to the concept of “transnational history”, which has been the object of debates among historians, who question the way in which it foregrounds and rehabilitates the nation as a legitimate perimeter of historical studies, whereas “world history” or “global history” would seem to offer a more scientifically neutral approach. Firstly, “transnational biography” may simply mean the writing of transnational lives (*Lebensläufe*), that is to say the history of individuals who spent a long span of their lives in a country different from their fatherland. The adoption of a foreign *Lebenswelt* poses a number of specific problems, which are far from being limited to questions of language, or of translation of one code into another. Secondly, “transnational biography” is therefore closely related to the theory of cultural transfers, first developed, in the wake of the reconciliation between

France and Germany after World War II, by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, although their first anthology entitled *Transferts culturels franco-allemands* was published in 1988. The most interesting point for biography studies is that these transnational migrants bring with them different cultural *habiti* that convey potentials of innovation for their adopted country. When the graft is successful, the transnational lives may be said to have been the vectors of cultural transfers. It is a particular case of the retroactive loop by which individuals and their milieus mutually co-produce one another. Writing the biography of such individuals or groups of individuals (like the Servan-Schreiber family, for instance), has got very little to do with fiction, but everything with social and anthropological investigation. Thirdly, as you rightly pointed out, “transnational biography” can also simply refer to biographies that are translated into foreign languages, but it is generally the subjects of such biographies that are not so much “transnational” as internationally famous, and in such cases their compatriots are naturally considered the most expert biographers. For instance, Rüdiger Safranski, wrote his life of Goethe in German for the German-speaking world, and then it was translated into several languages; that is all the same thing because Goethe is a *Weltliteratur* superstar. The case is different with biographers who are trying to arouse their compatriots’ interest in foreign subjects, whose culture they will have to explain to try and create connections. That is, for instance, Jean-Noël Liaut, writing the parallel lives of Elsa Triolet and Lili Brik, two Russian sisters that were literary Egeriae in the days of the Soviet Revolution, the one being Aragon’s mistress, the other Mayakovsky’s. But perhaps, after all, the difference is much the same between different countries and between different periods of history, for, as L.P. Hartley famously said, “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there”.

TX: *Two*, about comparative biography. You defined the concept in your essay “Two Biographers of François Mitterrand: Pierre Péan and Jean Lacouture.” What do you hope such a research will arrive at?

JM: I have proposed this concept of comparative biography studies, not in the sense of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* or Suetonius’ *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, where the same author compares different subjects with one another more or less explicitly, but in the sense of studying biographies of one and the same subject by different biographers. The notion should be related to comparative history, which compares elements of the past; that is roughly Plutarch’s parallel lives, comparing illustrious

Greeks and Romans. It should also be related to “*histoire croisée*”, developed by Michael Werner from the notion of cultural transfer, which, a little like “shared” or “connected” history, concentrates on zones of contact between different cultures, societies or groups. Comparative literature compares literary works from different cultural areas, or works of literature with works of other arts. *Comparative biography* is unique in the sense that it compares biographies of the same subject by different biographers. It could be seen simply as an exercise in historiography, or philosophy of history, if biography was history. However, the referent, being a single life, is relatively well circumscribed, and it turns out to be distinctive of biography also because such an approach would be relevant neither to autobiography, nor to fiction. Besides, it is a distinctive characteristic of a certain biography readership, for there are readers who will read several biographies of the same historical personage, and sometimes as many as they can find. Most of the time, before biographers start writing, they begin by reading all the previous biographies and the biographical documents in existence, and when they write, they do so for readers who also have a preexisting knowledge of the subject, or who have at least some idea of the story line. Moreover, a life has a referent—that is the flesh and blood human being who lived and died sometime in the past—but in most cases a life also has a *complex signifier*, an *eidolon*, a *collective construct*, that is not transcendental, but “superstructural,” or “noological”: that has an existence in Popper’s “world 3” as a myth, an idea, a construct, or in any case a “*pre-notion*”, as Émile Durkheim would say after Francis Bacon. Take the author of an autobiography, the author of a memoir, or an author of fiction: they all have an *authority* over their text, relatively to their readers, that a biographer has not. Biographers write under the control of their readers, not just in terms of aesthetic judgement (the biography is more or less pleasant to read), and ethic judgement (it can be fair or unfair, honest or dishonest), but also in terms of epistemic judgement, both categorical (it is true, or false; factual, or fictional) and conditional (it is more or less well informed, more or less verified).

TX: *Three, about the biographical perspectives. Your thesis “The Life Effect: Literature Studies and the Biographical Perspective” gives quite a substantial survey of various theories in spite of the widely accepted idea that biography has no theory. What is the connection between perspectives and theory in terms of life writing?*

JM: The article you are referring to is a chapter I wrote for the 2016

anthology *The Biographical Turn; Lives in History* edited by Pr. Hans Renders, chair of history and biography at the University of Groningen, in the Netherlands. Renders's "biographical turn" thesis is that we are currently witnessing a change of paradigm in the humanities comparable to the one described in 1967 by Richard Rorty in *The Linguistic Turn; Essays in Philosophical Method*. My argument in this paper is that there is indeed a recognizable paradigmatic shift of perspective, in literary science, away from the text-centred perspective of the structuralist and post-structuralist generation, who, by radically turning to linguistics in search of methodical models, had imposed a linguistic modelization on literary studies. This has gone so deep that today "theory" is often understood to be synonymous with this linguistic modelization of literary science and the humanities in general. But theory *per se* is not paradigmatic. It is an optical illusion, just as at the end of the eighteenth century it was easy to think that philosophy was materialistic, but at the end of the nineteenth century it could be viewed as intrinsically idealistic, and at the end of the twentieth century it could easily be confused with deconstruction. Likewise, in physics there have been paradigmatic shifts in the days of Copernic, and then with Newton, and again with Einstein. In the nineteenth century, literary science—what the Germans call *Literaturwissenschaft*—was conceived on a philological model, that is to say on the model of the evolutionary history of languages, with Taine, Lanson and Brunetière in France, and for instance in Spain today it is still called *filología*; in the early twentieth century literary science was modelled on history, with a premium on the biographical knowledge of the author under the influence of Sainte-Beuve, and Carlyle, and Emerson; after World War II, with John Crow Ransom and American New Criticism, then with Roland Barthes and French *Nouvelle critique*, it "killed the author", turned to linguistics for a new paradigm, and started worshipping the text. Today this linguistic modelization is exhausted. It has become a hindrance to the further advancement of knowledge. It has become necessary to admit, once again, that literature is related to reality—that, contrary to the gospel formerly preached by Jacques Lacan, the real is not at all impossible.

TX: You published biography studies as well as biographies. Do your reflections on biography guide your biographical writing? To be specific?

JM: Certainly, but I would say it was first the other way around; to have written biographies, to have published biographies with publishing houses of different levels, and to have practiced not just the craft, but

also the “trade” of the biographer—all the interaction with publishers, editors, series directors, interviews with printed press, radio and TV journalists, invitations to bookshop events, book fairs, public readings, etc. —these experiences and practices are crucial prerequisites to serious theoretical reflections on biography. One must first learn to know what one is talking about. True, George Bernard Shaw played the part of a musical critic although he was not a musician, but that was purely histrionic. John Ruskin was first a painter, and he could not have become such an important critic otherwise. For institutional reasons, at some point I have had to make a choice between theory and practice. It would be possible for a researcher historian to write biographies as research, but for a literature scholar it is hardly feasible. That is because biography is *referential* literature; it is absolutely reality-oriented. In other words, it is impossible to explain why research on this particular biographical subject, rather than any other one, is particularly relevant to the general study of biography as a genre. It simply is not. This being said, I am convinced that, when I start writing biographies again, it will be in an entirely different way. I also think that the development of biography theory will have an impact on the genre, because theory goes hand in hand with criticism, and therefore provokes an evolution of the general aesthetic judgement. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mikhail Bakhtin remarked that the theorization of the novel was almost non-existent relatively to the other genres, but the prodigious development of the theory of the novel over the last hundred years has obviously impacted the genre itself, and vice versa, be it only because it has modified the conditions of its reception, to such an extent that when we say “literature” today we tend to hear “fiction”.

TX: *An interesting thing is that your diction, whether in biography study or in biographical writing, is often noted for witty metaphors. You used a metaphor, say “the game of musical chairs”, to criticize the reviewed textbook for failing to include some heavyweight theorists. You compared an author’s awkward imitation of Stracheyan style to “a ventriloquist’s show”. Georges Clemenceau’s character in your eye is something of “a knot, a link, a hyphen of sorts”, to name a few. Such a feature reminds us of Paul de Man’s remark that “metaphors are much more tenacious than facts”. Do you take metaphor as a powerful device in Biography poetics?*

JM: Yes, that is a well-known citation from his *Allegories of Reading*, but De Man belonged to that generation of the “linguistic turn”, who

convinced themselves that there existed nothing but text, and that words were more powerful than deeds. I beg to disagree. In the case of De Man, some facts of his life, his past life in Belgium during World War II—although indeed these facts were essentially publications, and therefore texts—are very tenacious too, certainly much more so than many of his metaphors. But *Allegories of Reading* dates back to 1979, eight years before the revelations came out in a 1987 *New York Times* article entitled “Yale Scholar Wrote for Pro-Nazi Newspaper”. However, let us beware of Godwin’s law, and leave De Man’s not so secret anti-Semitic past aside for the moment; that is biography, and here we are discussing theory. You have done me too much honour indeed, reading my texts so closely as to single out some metaphorical phrases. Thank you very much. However, these quotations are taken from critical and theoretical texts, not from biographies. The “game of musical chairs” image I used in a critical review of a biography theory textbook, whose editors had to make rather unfortunate arbitrary choices in the second edition. The “ventriloquist’s show” simile comes from a review of a biography of Darwin, in which the biographer constantly transgresses one of the rules of the art by shifting into a shrill anti-Darwinian preacher’s voice, which gives the same effect as a ventriloquist being regularly interrupted by his puppet. The “knot, link, hyphen” metaphor comes from a conference paper in which I was discussing the possibility of writing a biography of Clemenceau for American readers. I was trying to say that “*le Tigre*” was the most American of French leaders, because he had lived in the US in his youth, and married an American, and also because of many aspects of his character. At the same time, Clemenceau was an intermediary figure between two periods: before and after the cult of great men was possible, so that he is perceived as a very important political leader, but perhaps not exactly as a “great man” in Carlyle’s sense. So, he was a hyphen with the past; but he was also a hyphen with the future, because his intransigence towards Germany in the negotiations of the Treaty of Versailles had terrible consequences in paving the way for World War II. More generally, metaphors are unavoidable in any writing. In fact, language is essentially metaphorical: using words for things, signs for referents, etc. In a sense, a biography is a complex metaphor for the subject. More importantly, the *self*, which is always a fiction, is itself a metaphor for the subject. I think there is a well-known Chinese proverb that says: “when the sage points at the moon, the fool looks at the finger.” Well, in biography, the moon is the fact

of life—the subject—and the finger is the fiction.

TX: *What is the purpose of a biography from the biographer's point of view?*

JM: I would like to answer this question by quoting the Irish poet Seamus Heaney: "I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing." This is what I think is the purpose of biographers when they write biographies. I also think this is the purpose of biography readers. The poem is entitled "Personal Helicon", and a helicon is also a musical instrument, but it is primarily a mountain in Greece, Mount Helicon, reputed to have been one of the residences of the Muses, with Mount Parnassus. On Mount Helicon can be found the Hippocrene spring, where Narcissus fell in love with his own image with his own *self* and a temple to the Muses, a *museion*, which is the etymological ancestor of our museums. I would like to return very briefly to Foucault's work on the notion of *parrêsia*, which is a practice to cultivate *alethurgia*, or the manifestation of the truth, and in the philosophical quest to "know yourself" *gnôthi seauton* it stands for the necessity of someone else, an "other", which is the *parrésiaste*. The *parrêsia*, Foucault says, is the "degree zero of rhetoric", or if you like the degree zero of metaphor; a mathematical limit to which biography tends asymptotically. This other one, this *parresiast* is distinctive of biography relatively to autobiography and to fiction. To explain the same thing more concretely, when we read fiction we relate to the "implied author", the author as we figure it out just as the writer relates to what Wolfgang Iser has called the "implied reader". In biography, there is a third one: *the "implied subject" that the biographer is reading by his writing, and that the reader is also reading through the biography.* In this relation, I suspect from experience that both the biographer and the reader are involved in a question, or a questioning, of themselves as subjects, as in most reading situations. This describes the distinctive reading situation of biography as a *ternary relationship between reader, subject, and biographer*, because in biography the personage is real too, whereas in fiction the main character is not, and in autobiography the personage is by definition no other than the implied author.

TX: *Interpretations are crucial in life writing. What is the criterion for the biographer to rely on for his interpretation?*

JM: I think that there is hardly ever only one criterion of interpretation, and I am not sure interpretation is exclusively the biographer's job. When we read an autobiography or a memoir, the interpretative situation is not very different from what it is when we read fiction. It is a dual relationship. In the case of a biography it is different: the

relationship is ternary, and the interpretation is dual. In biography, reading is *en abyme*, because a biography is already a reading, so that the biography reader is reading a reading. Furthermore, a biographer is most of the time reading a life through primary and secondary sources. Reader, biographer, secondary sources, primary sources (already used before by the authors of the secondary ones): that is already four times removed reading. Interpretation is indeed a complicated affair in biography. That is easy to realize, especially when one reads several biographies on the same subject, even more so when these biographies were written at different periods of history or in different countries; before long one finds oneself, as a reader, in disagreement with this or that biographer, as one advances in knowledge. This poses the question of the “readability” of the biographical subjects, which varies with time. By contrast, at this point it is interesting to mention the Spanish thinker Gregorio Mara \tilde{n} on y Posadillo (1887–1960), a writer of the so-called *generaci3n de 1914*, who developed the notion of “*biograf \acute{a} total*”. Mara \tilde{n} on was a physician, as well as a biographer, and he can be said to have advocated a scientific or positivistic approach to biography: he believed that by a thorough clinical and psychological analysis, it was possible to construct a complete interpretation, a “*biograf \acute{a} total*”, of the subject. Conversely, another Spanish biographer and theoretician of biography, his contemporary Ram3n G3mez de la Serna (1888–1963) preferred to speak of “*biograf \acute{a} integral*”, a radically different concept, which he envisaged as a “*resurrecci3n*” and a “*renovaci3n*”: a much more empathic, more literary than scientific, conception of biography, which implies the necessity of a constant rewriting of the life of a given subject, as long as the personage continues to have relevance for one generation after the other. Interpretation, for him, was a never-ending process, a continual miracle, “*el milagro de la renovaci3n biogr \acute{a} fica*”. Personally, I feel more sympathy for Ram3n than for Mara \tilde{n} on.

TX: *Perhaps from Lytton Strachey on, biographers tend to borrow some novelistic techniques largely. For instance, The Return, last year's Pulitzer Prize winner, reads very much like a riveting first-person novel with names of real people and real places. I mention this from the perspective of its composition, writing techniques, and artistic design. Postmodernism has the idea that even language itself cannot give a genuine picture of the contents. What do you think of the novelistic crafts in biography in a broad sense?*

JM: Yes, but Hisham Matar's *The Return* is a memoir, and it is typically an

example of what the Americans call “narrative nonfiction”, and even brilliant “creative nonfiction” in this case. In terms of poetics, it is not intrinsically different from fiction. Allow me, therefore, to leave the critical commentary of *The Return* to genuine memoir specialists. However, you mentioned this by way of introduction to the question of the use of novelistic techniques, or crafts, in biography. You are right to mention Lytton Strachey as an exemplar. At the same time, in the 1920s, Mikhail Bakhtin called this phenomenon “novelization”—“romanisation” in French. André Maurois, before he made an important contribution to biography theory in his 1928 Clarke lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, which were published as *Aspects of Biography*, to echo E.M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*, had published in 1923 a “novelized” biography of P.B. Shelley that received mixed criticism, on the ground that it was “*biographie romancée*”. Maurois and Strachey belonged, with Harold Nicolson, to the movement of the “The New Biography”: the appellation comes from the title of an essay by Virginia Woolf, published in a posthumous collection under the title *Granite & Rainbow*. It is a beautiful essay, in which Virginia Woolf says that the aim of biography is to “weld seamlessly” the “granite of truth” and the “rainbow of personality”, that is to say the “self”, of which she had the genius to perceive very early that it is made of the same stuff as fiction. She says that “the truth of fact and the truth of fiction are incompatible”, but the art of the biographer nevertheless consists in “that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow”. The two writers she had in mind more particularly were indeed Strachey and Maurois taken as two representatives of the same sort of “novelizing” biographers. But I would like to underline two crucial differences between them: Strachey mixes fictions with facts, which Maurois refuses to do, and Strachey is obtrusive, insisting to foreground his own point of view and to impose it upon his readers, whereas Maurois always strives to remain as self-effacing as he can, leaving as much of the interpretation as possible over to the readers.

TX: *What is a good biography? What are the major qualities for a good biography?*

JM: My personal preference goes to biographies by elegantly self-effacing biographers. When we read a biography, we are interested in the subject, not in the biographer, and above all we do not want the biographer to lecture to us and to tell us what to think. That is only a personal opinion, but your question is interesting also because it poses the problem of the critical judgement of biography. The issue of

novelization is again determinant, for just as in biographical films we have, on the one hand, documentaries, on the other hand, fictionalized “biopics”, and in-between the abominable mixture of “docufiction”, so print biographies tend either to the novelized form of the “*biographie romancée*”, or to a more or less academic form of the essay, and between these generic categories run-of-the-mill biographers churn out their industrial potpourris. For reasons that would be too long to explain, in cinema the preference of the public and the critics goes rather to the fictionalized “biopics”, whereas in literature the novelized style of biography remains suspect. The main reason for this state of things is that, in addition to the aesthetic and the ethic criteria of critical appreciation that apply to all other literary genres, the critical reception of biography has an additional epistemic criterion. The problem is on the whole that John Keats’s slogan, “Beauty is Truth, Truth, Beauty, that is all/ Ye know on earth and all ye need to know”, is beautiful, but not true. Whether we like or not, the aesthetic criteria by which a book is recognized as good fiction remain contradictory with the criteria by which a book is recognized as good science. As a result, the critical reception of biography will have to develop specific criteria by which to evaluate a genre whose existence is demonstrated by the fact that it fits in none of the Procrustean beds of its neighbours.

TX: *What do you think is the function of literary awards? Are they significant in promoting the development of biography?*

JM: Since the last decades of the previous century, there has been a growing number of literary awards devoted to biography. That is true in most countries, and particularly so in France, where several very significant prizes have been created over the last forty years, some of which by the most prestigious institutions, like the “*Prix Goncourt de la biographie*”, awarded yearly by the *Académie Goncourt* since 1980, or the “*Prix de la Biographie*” of the *Académie française*, since 1987. That is very important, and for several reasons. Firstly, it is an indubitable sign that the status of biography has been changing over a recent period of cultural history. It will always remain a popular genre par excellence, but it is no longer viewed as “low” culture: these prestigious awards are institutionalizing biography, and they are contributing to generating a canon for the genre. Secondly, it creates emulation, and a category of highly recognized biographers, so that biography can no longer seriously be viewed as *only* a form of what Sainte-Beuve called “industrial literature” (“*la littérature industrielle*”), published for

strictly mercenary motives; the awards are contributing to give biography its "*lettres de noblesse*". Thirdly, in the long term they are having a beneficial impact on the taste of the public as far as biography is concerned, be it only by establishing an "*académisme*" of the genre, in response to which a dissident, innovative avant-garde can one day re-emerge, as it has tentatively done in the past, in some rare cases, but also by fostering and nourishing a critical discourse in the literary press and academic journals, and a theoretical discourse in the universities. To this, we can only hope that we may have modestly contributed by this conversation of ours, for which I would like once again to thank you very much indeed.

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