"LIFE WRITING" *N'EST PAS FRANÇAIS*

THE YEAR IN FRANCE

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Napoleon is reputed to have said, "*impossible n'est pas français*" ("Lettre" 296), but he also exclaimed, "*Quel roman que ma vie!*" (*Mémorial* 342)—"My life, what a novel!" In France today, life writing seems *impossible*, and for all intents and purposes does not exist as such, unless it appears as another one of these ideas from *le monde anglosaxon*—the English-speaking world—that is to say the USA and its cultural epigones. In the extreme, the fact that there is an academic practice called life writing in other countries proves nothing else than the facility with which American cultural products export themselves to the rest of the world. The same thing has long applied to cultural studies, from which life writing derives in many ways: we have very recently begun to witness the blooming forth of a few master's degrees in *études culturelles*, although much of the ideological agenda of cultural studies—the trespassing across and at times the erasure of boundaries between high and low culture, as well as between disciplines, and between academic and market productions (between *l'Université* and *la société civile*)—has been lost in the process of acclimatization. Much in the same way, creative writing has never really had *droit de cité* in French universities, although there are a few sporadic *ateliers d'écriture*. *No pasarán* seems indeed to be the word. What we are witnessing here is a case of resistance to cultural transfer. To begin with, life writing is untranslatable into French: *écriture de vie* is simply not said; it is just not a concept. We do have *récit de vie* and *récit de soi*, but these refer to objects and methods of academic practices in the social sciences, and do not evoke cultural productions like *mémoires*, *autobiographies*, *autofiction*, *biographies*, and *biofictions*, which are regarded as literary genres or categories. *Les récits de vie* denotes a widely developed practice of social scientists who, moving away from the methods of Durkheimian sociology very much as some *nouveaux historiens*, close to the Italian school of *la microstoria*, swerved from the *longue*

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durée perspective of the *École des Annales* such as it was in the days of Fernand Braudel, and taking stock of the end of great narratives—"la fin des grands récits" that Jean-François Lyotard (63) has posited as defining the postmodern condition—revisited the "methodological individualism" and "observant participation" that, back in the 1930s, had characterized the Chicago School in the US and Mass Observation in the UK. Since Daniel Bertaux's *Le récit de vie: perspective ethnosociologique* (1996), sociologists have challenged Pierre Bourdieu's indictment of "*l'illusion biographique*" to adopt the "*méthode biographique*," using interviews and life stories whose narrators, situated within particular networks of social relations, are viewed as the mouthpieces of social groups. This is a road on which historians had preceded them, from Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie's bestselling *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (1975), retracing the lives of persecuted Cathars in a remote village in the south of France, to Pierre Nora's *Essais d'ego-histoire* (1987) where seven authors write their own life stories as historians.

Those were also the days when Philippe Lejeune published his seminal *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1975), before he founded the *Association pour l'autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique* (APA) in 1992, located in the small town of Ambérieu-en-Bugey, which has the particularity of collecting a rich archive of unpublished memoirs, diaries, autobiographies and autofictions (the word is said to have been coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977), academic research on autobiographies, and other life writing. At the turn of the century, Frédéric Regard published two important critical anthologies, *La biographie littéraire en Angleterre* (1999), and *L'Autobiographie littéraire en Angleterre* (2000), whose specialization in English literature is another indication of the strong anglophone tropism of life writing. Quite recently, Regard has coedited *Les Nouvelles écritures biographiques* (2013) with the Canadian Robert Dion, also the editor of *Vies en récit: Formes littéraires et médiatiques de la biographie et de l'autobiographie* (2010) and *Portraits de l'écrivain en biographe* (2012), roughly at the moment when François Dosse had seen the second edition of his theoretical monograph, *Le Pari biographique* (2005, 2011), a work translated into several languages, but surprisingly not into English, which is to biography what Lejeune's *The Autobiographical Pact* is to autobiography.

Whereas, as we shall see, general literature in France gives all the signs of being swept over by a wave of life writing—what Martine Boyer-Weinmann, the author of *La Relation biographique* (2005), has called a *libido biographica*—this phenomenon has not yet fully found the academic traction that is necessary to its coming of age. However, there have recently appeared some excellent studies that greatly contribute to giving biographical studies

their *lettres de noblesse*. Among the most remarkable works of this type, Elisabeth Gaucher, the author of *La biographie chevaleresque* (1994), has also published *L'autoportrait dans la littérature française: Du Moyen Age au XVIIe siècle* (2013). Anne-Marie Montluçon and Agathe Salha have edited *Fictions biographiques XIXe–XXIe siècles* (2007). Also in a historical perspective, Jean-Luc Chappey affords brilliant reflections on some political uses of biography since the French Revolution in *Ordres et Désordres Biographiques: Dictionnaires, listes de noms, réputations des Lumières à Wikipedia* (2013), as well as Olivier Ferret and Anne-Marie Faivre in *Biographie et Politique: Vie publique, vie privée, de l'Ancien Régime à la Restauration* (2014). Contributing rather to a much needed theorization of life writing, Alexandre Gefen, in *Inventer une vie: La fabrique littéraire de l'individu* (2015), works more generally on the concept of biofiction, a term coined by Alain Buisine in a 1991 issue of the journal *Revue des sciences humaines* on "Le Biographique." Antoine Compagnon and Philippe Roger have edited an issue of the journal *Critique* entitled *Biographies: mode d'emploi* (2012). Françoise Palleau and Lou Rowan are preparing a forthcoming issue of the journal *Itinéraires* on "Biographie et fiction." As enlightening as these contributions are, they remain relatively one-shot attempts, for lack of a defined perimeter of life writing, and therefore the absence of groups or centers working specifically in the field, as there are so many in other countries. There was simply no research structure devoted to biography in France before the foundation of the Biography Society in 2015.

Undoubtedly, there are historical reasons for that, and some observers will bring forth the obvious explanation that so-called French theory has been radically adverse to biography, from Barthes's "death of the author" to Foucault's invectives against the subject, to Althusser's anti-humanism, and to Bourdieu's "biographical illusion." True, theory resists biography, but the fact is that there is also life writing that resists theory. Be that as it may, theory has been behind us and at a standstill for several decades now, and on the other hand life writing remains a low-theory practice: it has functioned as a stalking horse to reintroduce auto/biography in academia at a time when, in the late twentieth century, it was still anathema. Today the slash (between auto and bio) is most probably the main brake: it is a methodological and no longer an ideological brake; the theory of autobiography is hardly advancing any more, and it has an inhibiting effect on the theorization of biography, which is simply another genre and cannot efficiently be subsumed into auto/biography. This optical illusion is reinforced by the simultaneous success of biography and biofiction on the contemporary literary market, which appear as one and the same phenomenon, although the reading publics are most probably not the same.

One of the most significant publications in France in recent years is at first sight not explicitly about life writing, but is in fact relevant to the field's main issues: Ivan Jablonka's *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine: Manifeste pour les sciences sociales* (2014) purports to bridge the gap among different disciplines, including history, literature, and the social sciences, but also between academic writing and literary productions destined for the general reading public: "Imaginons une science sociale qui captive, une histoire qui émeut parce qu'elle démontre et qui démontre parce qu'elle s'écrit, une enquête où se dévoile la vie des hommes, une forme hybride qu'on peut appeler texte-recherche ou creative history—une littérature capable de dire vrai sur le monde."[1] Jablonka's point is not to reinvent the wheel of narrative history, which is a form of popularization and diffusion that really aims to bring history to the literary market, in the tradition of the Dumases, Father & Son, or, closer to us in time Maurice Druon. No, what Jabonka is advocating is that a certain *literary*, *creative practice of historical investigation* is a promising way toward further advancements of knowledge in the humanities. He regrets the "lamentable waste" by which "postmodernist skepticism" and the linguistic turn that has presided over French theory has silenced for a while the "rhetorical turn" of narrativist historians like Hayden White, compelling history to define itself over again against literature: "Ce renoncement est une haine de soi. Car la littérature n'est pas expulsable de l'histoire ; on peut seulement l'affadir, la rendre plate et insignifiante. Cette automutilation a quatre causes: l'absence de méthode qui caractérisait les belles-lettres; le prestige de la science, utile et solide; l'hégémonie du roman, devenu un quasi-synonyme de littérature; la menace sceptique."[2] In this insightful essay, Jablonka coins at least two main concepts that should prove very useful to theoretical reflections about lif writing: "supertrue fictions"—"*fictions survraies*"—and "method fictions"—"*fictions de méthode*." "Superior truths"—"*les vérités supérieures*" are conveyed by supertrue fictions, truer than truth, more real than the real, that shock readers and make them cry out, "Yes, it is exactly that!" Some novels are so powerful that they bring "*l'effet de réel*" to an unequalled degree. This is one of the uses of fiction that characterizes what the author calls *la littérature du réel* (the literature of the real) that is coming so powerfully to the foreground of contemporary literature: uses of fiction that serve to *rechercher et construire le vrai* (to research and construct the true). These are *fictions réelles* (method fictions or real fictions). As Jablonka says, "je les appellerai fictions de méthode. Elles ne se réduisent pas à l'imagination."[3] The difference between novel fictions and method fictions, Jablonka goes on to say, resides only in the uses that are made of them. "Les fictions de méthode peuvent être

regroupées en quatre familles fonctionnelles: l'estrangement, la plausibilité, la conceptualisation, le procédé narrative."[4]

The relevance to life writing appears clearly when we realize that this critical essay is framed by two of Jablonka's works of practical application: *Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai pas eus: Une enquête* (2013), which has won the Prix Guizot de l'Académie française, the Prix du Sénat du Livre d'histoire, and the Prix Augustin Thierry, and *Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes* (2016), which has been awarded the Prix Médicis and the Prix Le Monde. It is worth noting that the Prix Médicis is not an award for historical texts, but one of the major literary prizes in France, which demonstrates how biographical writing, in spite of some lingering preconceived ideas based on outdated impressions, has already conquered the highest level of recognition in this country. Whereas in *Histoire des grands-parents* Jablonka was practicing a form of autobiographical self-archeology reminiscent of Jerome Charyn's, writing the history of his own grandparents destroyed by the tragedies of the 20th century, in *Laetitia* he turned to biography, writing the life of a young woman who was murdered in 2011, to restore dignity and singularity to a person whose life had been reduced to the story of the crime that erased her. The very favorable reviews that the book has received bear witness to the surprising effect produced by the realization of the literary- and social-criticism potency of this *genre hybride*, a supertrue fiction, a most serious historical and sociological investigation, turning out to be more captivating to read than most of the best novels.

As a remarkable figure in French life writing, Ivan Jablonka is a case in point: born in 1973, he is a professor of contemporary history at the University of Paris XIII, and there is absolutely no breach of continuity to speak of between his academic research and his literary production. Moreover, the publication in rapid succession of a theory like *L'histoire est une littérature contemporaine* and a work of practice like *Laëtitia*, both at the Éditions du Seuil, albeit in very different styles, proves that there is no incompatibility between theory and life writing, least of all in France, paradoxical though it may still have seemed some forty years ago. This ideological fault line was already beginning to give way, as we have seen, as early as in the mid-1970s, back in the days of *Montaillou* and *Le Pacte autobiographique*.

Far from being an isolated case, Jablonka's case is in fact representative of a current evolution of French literature that has all the appearances of a biographical landslide. A study of the award-winning books of the main French literary prizes in the last ten years reveals that these texts are nearly all closely related to biography in one way or another. Take the Prix Goncourt: in 2016, Leïla Slimani's *Chançon douce* is the novel that tells the life story of a nurse who murdered the two children she was looking after in 2012 in New York;

in 2015, Mathias Énard's *Boussole* revisits the life of Viennese musicologist Franz Ritter von Kobel (1803–1822); in 2014, Lydie Salvayre's *Pas Pleurer* relates the life of the author's mother in the Spanish Civil War. Consider also the winners of the Prix Renaudot: in 2015, Delphine Le Vigan's *D'après une histoire vraie* is a novel that subtly mimick autofiction; in 2014, David Foenkinos's *Charlotte* is a verse novel inspired from the life of Charlotte Salomon (1917–1943), a German painter murdered in Auschwitz when she was pregnant; in 2013, Yann Moix's *Naissance* is an autobiographical novel in which the author tells the story of his own birth and early years of maltreatment at the hands of his biological parents—and the list goes on. To select just one other telling example, Jean Échenoz, one of the most well-established contemporary French novelists, after having written in 2001 *Jérôme Lindon*, a narrative of his personal relation with the founder of Éditions de Minuit, has published three novelized biographies in a row: *Ravel* (2006) on the musician of that name, *Courir* (2008), a life of Czechoslovak long-distance runner Emil Zátopek, and *Des éclairs* (2010), a life of Serbian-American inventor Nikola Tesla.

Contemporary French fiction is characterized by an astounding biographical tropism, a biographization of a magnitude comparable to the novelization of other genres Mikhail Bakhtin witnessed one century ago. Moreover, in the French literary landscape, biography and autobiography as specific genres, or for that matter life writing, although there is no equivalent generic term in French, is looming large, although in an unobtrusive way. A study of literary prizes devoted to *biographie*, *autobiographie*, *mémoires*, and the like shows that there are at least as many of those as in the UK and in the US, and at quite the same level of prestige. Several of the most renowned literary prizes have a special issue for biography: there is a Prix Goncourt de la Biographie since 1980, a Prix de la Biographie de l'Académie française since 1987, and numerous dedicated awards—Grand Prix de La Biographie Politique, Prix de la Biographie Le Point-Ville de Nîmes, Prix de la Biographie de la Ville d'Hossegor, Prix Geneviève Moll de la Biographie—to which must be added awards for historical texts that mainly distinguish biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs—Grand prix du livre d'histoire Ouest-France, Prix de la Fondation Pierre-Lafue, Prix Brantôme, Prix Combourg Chateaubriand, Prix des Ambassadeurs, Prix Guizot-Calvados, Prix Hugues-Capet, Prix Marcel-Pollitzer, Prix Nouveau Cercle Interallié, Prix Pierre-Georges Castex—and remarkably these prizes are occasionally awarded to preeminent foreign biographers whose works have been translated into French. Although, strangely enough, there is no such thing as a French national dictionary of biography that would be the equivalent of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

in the UK or the *American National Biography* in the US, there exists an established canon of recognized contemporary biographers—among whom we may quote a few obvious names like those of François Kersaudy, Jean-Christian Petitfils, François Dosse, Simone Bertière, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, Dominique Bona, and Gonzague Saint-Bris. Many modern French biographers are renowned academics, journalists, lawyers, or members of other professions, some of them are well-off professional writers, and a rapid biographical inquiry shows that most of them, men and women, are distinguished members of French society, belonging to national orders of military and civil merit. In other words, French biographers or life writers would certainly have no reason to complain about a deficit of recognition compared with their counterparts in other countries. The notion that France is no country for biography is a myth: the reality is quite the contrary. Life writing *n'est pas français*: that is true of the word only (an impossible word if you ask us), but the facts of life are entirely different.

NOTES

1. Let us imagine a social science that captivates, a history that moves us because it demonstrates and that demonstrates because it is a writing, an enquiry where the lives of individuals unveil themselves, a hybrid form that we can call research-text or creative history—a literature that is capable of telling the truth about the world. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.)
2. This renunciation is self-hatred. For it is impossible to expel literature from history: it can only be rendered tasteless, flat, and insignificant. This self-mutilation has four causes: the lack of method that characterized the belles-lettres; the prestige of science as being useful and strong; the hegemony of the novel that has become a quasi-synonym for literature; and the threat of skepticism.
3. I shall call them method fictions. They are not reducible to imagination.
4. Method fictions can be grouped into four functional families: estrangement, plausibility, conceptualization, and narrative device.

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