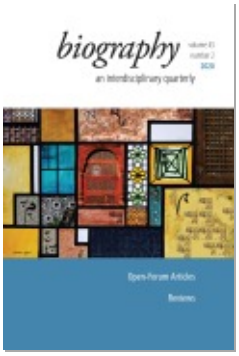


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Biography in Contemporary France

Joanny Moulin

In the preface to *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey declares "we have never had, like the French, a great biographical tradition" (vi). To the French this assertion appears remarkably erroneous. For it is first in Great Britain, with Izaak Walton and John Aubrey, then in the eighteenth century, with Samuel Johnson and his biographer James Boswell, that biography received its *lettres de noblesse*. French literature has hardly any canonical biographies or biographers comparable with these. Perhaps Protestantism played a historical role in this respect, with the relatively greater importance it gives to the individual, and a tendency to scrutinize each individual life, looking for signs of grace. In the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle, developing a vision of history centered on the cult of Great Men in *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, could declare that "The History of the world is but the Biography of great men" (39), and in America his disciple Ralph Waldo Emerson, the thinker of Transcendentalism that he himself described as an Americanization of German Idealism, and the author of *Representative Men*, insisted that "There is properly no history, only biography" (15). In France, this was the tradition of Gustave Lanson, Ferdinand Brunetière, Hippolyte Taine, and most of all Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve,[1] who based literary science on the study of the biography of writers.

In recent years, there has been a notable change in the perception and status of biography in France. François Dosse, who is one of the most renowned biographers in this country, and whose theoretical work *Le pari biographique* is perhaps to the genre what Philippe Lejeune's *Le pacte autobiographique* has been to autobiography, remarks, "Since the 1990s, savant historians, when they write biographies, no longer need to justify themselves to their peers for having chosen this genre, for it is no longer depreciated" [Depuis les années 1990, les historiens savants, auteurs de biographies, n'ont plus besoin de se justifier auprès de leurs pairs pour avoir choisi ce genre car il n'est plus objet de dépréciation] (112). However, whereas biography is now seen in a quite favorable light in history and the social sciences, it remains rather less obvious in other disciplines, especially in literary studies. Biography is still caught in this paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, it has entered the most reputed publishing houses and boasts its own set of literary prizes, and yet on

the other hand, there lingers around it a persistent bad repute, which is perhaps essentially a vestige from a not-so-distant past. Arguably, the main reason for this is that while biography is well established as a respectable *practice* in history and the social sciences, it is still waiting to become an object of study in its own right for French literary scholars. True, many works are devoted to life writing in a more general sense, but the study of biography as a specific literary genre would deserve further attention.

In the twentieth century, literary theory has wanted to distinguish itself from the tradition of the previous age of individualism, under the influence of structuralism, which on the contrary preferred to focus on the text itself, isolating it from its contexts of production—that is to say from its author—by denouncing the "Intentional Fallacy," and of reception—that is to say from its reader—by rejecting the "Affective Fallacy." Partly because of these historical reasons, biography found itself excluded from the field of literature properly speaking. Besides, biography has been distinguished from history from the beginning, at least since the days of Plutarch, who, in his introduction to his *Life of Alexander*, asserted that "We do not write histories, but lives." Moreover, Marxist criticism, in literature, in history, and in the social sciences, also turned away from individuals, whom it tended to consider as merely representatives of social classes or categories, conditioned by their historical and social circumstances.[2]

Greatly indifferent to what happens or not in the universities, biography as such, that is to say as distinct from other genres like autobiography, memoir, the diary, the essay, or fiction, maintains itself quietly as a powerful literary field and a strongly established institution. Biography is a genre of writing, but it is also a cultural phenomenon. It is an industry and a market: it is a field of production and consumption, and insofar as literature is understood in the broadest sense of the book industry, as long as we are speaking of biography in book form to the exclusion of the biographical film, biography is a literary field. As in many other countries, there are publishers who specialize in biography, at least in some of their book series, there are professional biographers and occasional authors of biographies, and biography festivals as in Nîmes or Hossegor. Like all other literary productions, biographies are reviewed more or less favorably in print and online publications, and biographers may win book awards or prizes that may or may not be specifically devoted to biographies.

One specificity of biographies is that they may have a political impact, because they are nonfictional productions dealing with historical figures (of whatever category). In fact, most of them don't, but some do. Here we could cite the example of Pierre Péan's partial biography of socialist President Mitterrand published during his first term of office, which made quite a splash by reminding the public that Mitterrand had collaborated with the Pétain government during World War II, and that he continued to receive the notorious collaborationist René Bousquet at the

Élysée even while he was the President of the Republic elected by the Union of the Lefts. Moreover, the book revealed some surprising details of his private life. Likewise, for instance, in the 2017 presidential election, several biographies of the main candidates were published, obviously written to convince the public to vote either for or against this or that candidate.

That is a time-honored tradition, which has existed in France, although certainly not exclusively, at least since the days of the Revolution, as Jean-Luc Chappey shows in a 2013 study. Libelous biographies served as political weapons to erode the power of the figures of the *ancien régime*, and then to make, unmake, and remake the reputations of candidates to elections since the earliest days of French democracy. With the First Empire, biographical files became an instrument of power by which the state has exerted some more or less covert control over individuals. At one point in the 2017 election again, the outgoing President François Hollande and his main challenger François Fillon were both eliminated from the race by biographical revelations, made in book form for the first, and through news articles for the second.

It is possible that this is one of the reasons why biography remains *mal-aimée* in France. We let it be understood that we don't like biography because it is ancillary to the cult of great men, because it cultivates the cult of heroes for gullible readers. But, in fact, it becomes an effective danger only to great men themselves when it ruins their reputations, sometimes destroying them politically. Be that as it may, one specificity of the state of biography in France that tends to make it a problematic field, not to say an ideological battlefield, is its complicated relation to the notion of *identité nationale*, which tends to be equated with *roman national* (Nora, *Les Lieux* 4712),[3] in a very French mentality that wishes to convince itself that national identity is at best a dangerous construction.[4] In the essay *Identity: Fragments, Frankness* written in the wake of President Sarkozy's proposal to have a general debate on the issue of *identité nationale* in 2009, Jean-Luc Nancy asks, "Could it be that the question of national identity is turning, and turning out badly? But do we even know what we are talking about?" (1). There is an ideological knot here, no doubt related to World War II and the fascist Vichy régime's concept of "Révolution Nationale," a counter-revolutionary notion all the more traumatic because it tampered with the founding myth of the French Republic, the Revolution as an epic of the birth of the modern Nation, of which Clemenceau used to say that "la Révolution est un bloc" (144), meaning that it is sacred and intangible. There is at least one obvious recent example of a monumental French biographer: Max Gallo, the son of Italian immigrants who came to France to seek refuge from Mussolini's politics. Gallo was a communist in youth, a socialist in adulthood, and a conservative in old age. Gallo wrote popular biographies with a view to vindicate the history of the French Nation to the French people, in a sort of neo-Carlylean hero worship. He was admired for that by part of the right, and for the same reason despised by the

left, and ignored by the intelligentsia. For all that, Gallo was a member of the Académie Française, which happens to be a double-edged, not to say an ambiguous and reversible, mode of literary fame.

The Académie in France has very little to do with the Université. Biography has next to no existence in the universities. Although some academics do write biographies, they do so, it is generally supposed, because they have nothing better to do with their spare time, or to make some easy money. On the contrary, biography belongs very much with the Académie, not least because it remains a very *académique* genre, a genre characterized by its paucity of innovation and its almost total lack of avant-garde. Some of the most famous and respected French biographers are *immortels*, as members of the Académie Française are familiarly called, as for instance Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, Dominique Bona, or Max Gallo.

However, although the notion of life writing[5] does not have any academic or critical currency to speak of in France, growing attention has been paid to autobiographies of various styles since the days of Philippe Lejeune's *Pacte autobiographique*. Moreover, in recent years there has been a notable flourishing of autobiographical narratives and memoirs, and more generally speaking, the type of writing that does qualify as life writing in all but name. This is so much the case that one sometimes has the impression—roughly one century after Mikhail Bakhtin noticed a "novelization" of literary genres and wrote that "almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent 'novelized'" (5, 7, et passim)—that fiction in print and film is becoming more and more biographized, undergoing what could be called a "biographization." That is especially true if biography is understood in the larger sense of life writing, considering that "autobiography today [. . .] subsumes all that belongs either to the intimate or to the biographical, albeit foreign to the writing of the self" [L'autobiographie à l'époque contemporaine [. . .] subsume tout ce qui relève d'une part de l'intime et d'autre part du biographique, fût-il étranger à l'écriture de soi] (Macé 35).[6]

Such a statement implies a highly debatable categorization, which I argue epitomizes the main scientific problem that stands in the way of the theorization of biography.[7] It is not the purpose of this article to investigate this complicated issue. For one part, this question has some ideological implications, as we have begun to see. For another part, it raises the question of critical judgment, insofar as biographies in the narrower sense call for epistemic, as well as aesthetic, criteria of appreciation. One of the tokens of this generic difference is the remarkable fact that biography in the narrower sense perseveres as a distinct literary field, in France as in many other countries, strongly delineated by specific series in most publishing houses. For example, Éditions Gallimard has two biography series: Collection NRF Biographies and Collection Folio Biographies. Collection NRF Biographies, founded in 1988, has forty-nine titles, forty-three authors, and 615,000 books sold. The best seller is Laure Adler's *Marguerite Duras* (1998) with 93,600 copies. The collection is devoted, though not exclusively, to publishing the lives of Gallimard

writers. Previously known as "Leurs figures" (1941–1984), it has been directed by Ran Halévi since 2005. One third of its titles are translations from the English of biographies of American or British writers. Collection Folio biographies, founded in 2005, has 135 titles, eighty-seven authors, and 850,000 books sold. Its best seller is Sophie Chauveau's *Léonard de Vinci* (2008) with 22,400 copies. The collection is devoted to second editions in pocket paperbacks of titles published in other collections.

Some publishing houses have special series for biographies, other publish biographies in their "history" series, and others publish biographies in various series. Here is a list of the main publishers for biographies in France:

Publisher	**Series (Collection)**
Gallimard	Collection NRF Biographies Collection Folio Biographies
Flammarion	Grandes biographies
Éditions de Fallois	Mémoires et Biographies
Perrin	Vérités et Légendes
Ellipses	Biographies et Mythes historiques
Albin Michel	
Armand Colin	Histoire
Fayard	Histoire
Grasset	
L'Archipel	Histoire
Le Cerf	
Le Seuil	
Plon	
Robert Laffont	

Another indication that biographies run in a distinct category is the fact that they are awarded prestigious literary prizes, but also *sui-generis* literary prizes that have been founded to honor only biographies in their own right. As a matter of fact, the number of specific prizes in France has grown exponentially since the end of World War II, as is made clearly apparent in the following table of awards devoted to biography, or which are frequently awarded to biographies, ordered by their foundation year from the most recent:

Award	Since	Details
Prix Geneviève Moll de la Biographie	2012	Éditions Fayard
Prix de la Biographie de la Ville d'Hossegor	2007	Salon du livre d'Hossegor
Grand Prix de la Biographie politique	2006	*Livre Hebdo*/Compagnie financière Saint-Thomas
Prix Brantôme	2006	Société des Amis de Brantôme
Le Grand Prix du Livre d'Histoire *Ouest-France*	2006	*Ouest-France*/Société Générale
Prix de la Biographie	2001	*Le Point*/Festival de Biographie de la ville de Nîmes
Prix Combourg Chateaubriand	1998	Hervé Louboutin et la comtesse de La Tour du Pin Verclause
Prix Hugues-Capet	1994	A book on "a king of France, a Queen of France or a Capet Prince, one of their ascendants, spouses or descendants, or one of the great servants of the realm" [un roi de France, une reine de France, un prince capétien, l'un de leurs aïeuls, de leurs conjoints, de leurs descendants, ou sur l'un des grands serviteurs du royaume].
Prix Guizot-Calvados	1993	Every other year
Prix François-Millepierres	1988	Académie Française
Prix de la Biographie/ Académie Française	1987	

Prix Nouveau Cercle Interallié	1983	Merger of former Prix du Nouveau Cercle and Prix du Cercle de l'Union
Prix Goncourt de la Biographie	1980	City of Nancy/Centre National du Livre
Prix du Mémorial/ Grand Prix littéraire d'Ajaccio	1977	City of Ajaccio and Association culturelle du Mémorial
Prix de la Fondation Pierre-Lafue	1976	
Prix Marcel-Pollitzer	1972	"A history book, preferably a biography."
Prix Aujourd'hui	1962	
Prix des Ambassadeurs	1947	Jury of twenty ambassadors. Sénat House. Presided by the Secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie française
Grand Prix catholique de littérature	1945	Association des écrivains catholiques de langue française (1886)

The increasing number of awards is likely symptomatic of a steadily growing readership. A quick look at the book reviews shows that hardly a week elapses without some new biography being published, by authors ranging from occasional to professional biographers, some of whom enjoy an obvious reputation as established writers in the genre. In terms of who the main biographers writing in France are today, there is a short list of writers identified as biographers because they have published exclusively or principally biographies on a regular basis, so that they have a biographical opus, widely recognized and rewarded by prizes and awards. The following indications retain a degree of arbitrariness, although they are the result of an enquiry conducted through a questionnaire addressed to the members of several international networks of academic and non-academic biography readers, asking them to rate biographers in a list of authors who had published several biographies or won at least one award since the beginning of the century.[8]

The most important political biographer in France today is probably François Kersaudy, a historian and a professor at the University of Paris, with a characteristic record of parallel lives: two biographies entitled *De Gaulle et Churchill* (1981 and 2003), *Churchill contre Hitler* (2002) and *De Gaulle et Roosevelt* (2004),

but also *Lord Mountbatten* (2006), *Hermann Goering* (2009), *Hitler* (2011), *Staline* (2012), *MacArthur* (2014). Kersaudy also directs the Maîtres de guerre series at Éditions Perrin.

Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, a highly esteemed French historian of Georgian origin and a specialist in Russian history, has been a member of the Académie Française since 1990 and the Perpetual Secretary since 1999. Among many history books, she is the author of two biographies of Lenin (1979 and 1998), and also *Staline* (1979), *Nicolas II* (1996), *Catherine II* (2002), and *L'Impératrice et l'abbé: un duel littéraire inédit* (2003) on Catherine II and the abbot Chappe d'Auteroche. Dominique Bona, another female member of the Académie Française since 2013, is the author of eleven biographies to date, out of which eight are biographies of women: *Les Yeux noirs, ou les Vies extraordinaires des sœurs Hérédia* (1989), a biography of Gala Dalí (1994), *Berthe Morisot* (2000), *Il n'y a qu'un amour* (2003), a biography of the three women involved with André Maurois—whose influence is strongly felt in Bona's style—*Camille et Paul Claudel* (2006), *Clara Malraux* (2010), *Deux sœurs: Yvonne et Christine Rouart, muses de l'impressionnisme* (2012), and a biography of Jeanne Voilier, *Je suis fou de toi: le grand amour de Paul Valéry* (2014).

In a very different style, Jean-Christian Petitfils is the author of best-selling biographies par excellence, and he happens to be an amateur in the noblest sense of the term, *un amateur éclairé*, since he led a career as a biographer in parallel with another as a high-level executive in private banking. Petitfils has tended to specialize in the French royals, with biographies of *Louis XIII, XI, XVI*, but also *Fouquet*, *Madame de Montespan*, *Louise de la Vallière*, etc., and last but not least a life of *Jésus* (2011), which broke all records. His output is clearly an example of what Sainte-Beuve used to call *la littérature industrielle*. Petitfils's career demonstrates that biography in France is also a very profitable business, as well as in most other Western countries. In the same category of best-selling authors, two other biographers should be mentioned, whose deaths in the summer of 2017 left a considerable gap in the field: Max Gallo, another member of the Académie Française, and Gonzague Saint Bris. In different styles, they personified the popular biographer in France.

On the scholarly side of the spectrum, the biographer whose name comes most readily to mind is certainly François Dosse, who has an impressive record of biographies of French intellectuals, including Paul Ricoeur, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Pierre Nora, Michel de Certeau, and Cornelius Castoriadis. François Dosse has elaborated a method that consists of interviewing not only his subjects, but also a large panel of contemporaries who have known them. Dosse has also made a major contribution to the theory of biography with his essay *Le Pari biographique: écrire une vie*. His latest publication is a prosopography or group biography, in two volumes: *Saga des intellectuels français* (Gallimard 2018).

Here is an alphabetical list of other award-winning French biographers with their latest awards in the twenty-first century:

Author	Title	Prize
Simone Bertière	*Le Procès Fouquet* (Éditions de Fallois, 2013)	Grand prix du livre d'histoire *Ouest-France* 2014
Gérard Bonal	*Colette* (Perrin, 2014)	Prix Brantôme 2015 de la Biographie historique
Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret	*Le Cardinal Dubois* (Perrin, 2000)	Prix de l'Académie française 2001
Bernard Cottret	*Jean-Jacques Rousseau en son temps* (Perrin, 2004)	Prix Pierre-Georges-Castex 2006
Alain Decaux (1925–2016)	*Fabuleux destins* (Perrin, 2015)	Prix de la fondation Pierre-Lafue 2010 pour l'ensemble de son œuvre
Béatrix de L'Aulnoit and Philippe Alexandre	*Pour Mon Fils, pour Mon Roi: la reine Anne, mère de Louis XIV* (Robert Laffont, 2009)	Prix Hugues-Capet 2009
Jean-Noël Liaut	*Les Sœurs insoumises: Elsa Triolet et Lili Brik* (Robert Laffont, 2015)	Prix de la Biographie de l'Académie française 2015
Pierre Milza (1932–2018)	*Garibaldi* (Fayard, 2013)	Prix Marcel-Pollitzer 2013
Claude-Henri Rocquet	*Goya* (Buchet Chastel, 2008)	Grand Prix catholique de littérature 2009
Emmanuel de Waresquiel	*Fouché: les silences de la pieuvre* (Tallandier/Fayard, 2014)	Meilleure Biographie 2014 par le magazine *Lire*; Prix Essai France Télévision 2015; Prix du Mémorial/Grand Prix littéraire d'Ajaccio 2015.
Charles Zorgbibe	*Metternich, le séducteur diplomate* (Éd. de Fallois, 2009)	Prix Marcel-Pollitzer 2010

Such a list indicates that biography is firmly established as a literary institution in its own right, with a market of its own, but also with dedicated publishing houses and awards, as well as a canon of recognized biographers, albeit more discretely renowned than their counterparts among novelists. For all that, compared to the other genres, biography receives very little attention on the two crucial planes of

criticism and theory. Critical reception is limited to reviews in specialized sections of newspapers, magazines, and blogs, but there are hardly any studies of biographers' works. Award jury members make another critical evaluation of biographies, but it remains inarticulate, in the sense that it is the result of a vote, and hardly gives occasion for critical publications. Reviewers, for their part, mostly concentrate on the contents of the biographies, that is to say on their subjects, rather than on the biographers' style and rhetoric.

Principally for this reason, biography remains untouched by the advances of literary theory and philosophy of history. That is partly a consequence of the essentially uncategorized situation of biography: not exactly history, literature, fiction, essay, autobiography, or memoir. If in some disciplines like history, biography remains one of the modes of academic writings, it has been efficiently eradicated as a mode of literary studies, which have resolutely abandoned the once-traditional "life and works," author-oriented approach. Given that the textualist school of so-called "French theory," which in many respects was a continuation of American New Criticism, represents a radical turn away from the context and the author, the biographical approach, and therefore biography more generally speaking, found itself most of the time in a blind spot of the field of theoretical vision, although it has not been left entirely outside of literary theory.

In 1967, the year of Maurois's death, Roland Barthes published a seminal text, "The Death of the Author," in which he maintained that the very notion of the author is a social construct that imposes a transcendental meaning external to the text itself. Proclaiming the death of the author much as Nietzsche had announced the death of God, Barthes claimed to detach literary criticism from the "bourgeois" tradition personified by Sainte-Beuve among other literati of the previous century. Continuing in the line of argument that had been Proust's, Barthes joined the New Critics Wimsatt and Beardsley in denouncing the "Intentional Fallacy," but he went one step further, insisting that the author could no longer be the anchoring point for the meaning of the text. Instead, the meaning of a text must be produced by the *lector*, considered to be the embodiment of critical reading even to the risk of falling into the "Affective Fallacy," which "begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism" (Wimsatt 22). Barthes wrote:

> The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, or, as it is more nobly put, the "human person." It is thus logical that in literature it should be this positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the "person" of the author. [. . .] The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions [. . . .] The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the

> end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" in us. (50)

Barthes's argument against the biographical approach in literary science, expressed as a theoretical statement in "The Death of the Author," led him to propose a new perspective on biographical writing, which he practiced to some extent in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, which can be seen as a variation on Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. In the preface to this book, Barthes introduced the notion of "biographeme," a notion he put into practice in his autobiography, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*: "a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: 'biographemes' whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate" (*Sade, Fourier, Loyola* 9). The keywords here are "mobility" and "fate": Barthes's objection to traditional biography is the postulate of a "fate," a "destiny," which would define a "Self" with an essence existing in the absolute, outside the "mobility" of life considered as an Epicurean flux.

It may sound ironic that Leon Edel should have singled out the novels of Marcel Proust as a model for his innovations in biography, declaring that "Proust is perhaps a better guide to modern biography than Boswell" (*Writing Lives* 29–30). For biography made an important, if negative entrance in literary theory with Proust's 1908 *Figaro* article, which would give its title to the collection of essays published posthumously in 1954, *Contre Sainte-Beuve.* In this seminal text, on the eve of undertaking his magnum opus, the author of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927) launched an epoch-making attack on Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869), the celebrated man of letters of the nineteenth century whose method of literary science was characteristically based on the study of the life of authors through gathering as many biographical documents as possible and by interviewing people who had known the author whenever possible. Proust condemned the Beuvian method as "not profound," because

> Sainte-Beuve's work lacks depth. His famous method [. . .] ignores what a minimal degree of self-knowledge teaches us: that a book is the product of another *me* than the one we manifest in our habits, in society, in our vices. That me, if we try to understand it, is at the bottom of ourselves, and by trying to recreate it in ourselves, we can manage to do so. [. . .] This truth, we must make from scratch [. . .].
>
> [L'œuvre de Sainte-Beuve n'est pas une œuvre profonde. La fameuse méthode, [. . .] méconnaît ce qu'une fréquentation un peu profonde avec nous-mêmes nous apprend : qu'un livre est le produit d'un autre *moi* que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. Ce moi-là, si nous voulons essayer de le comprendre, c'est au fond de nous-mêmes, en essayant de le recréer en nous, que nous pouvons y parvenir. Rien ne peut nous dispenser de cet effort de notre cœur. Cette vérité, il nous faut la faire de toutes pièces [. . .]. (*Contre Sainte-Beuve* 27)

Proust's diatribe against Sainte-Beuve may be read as expressing a Modernist (or pre-Modernist) point of view, foreshadowing the American New Criticism of John Crowe Ransom in the 1920s and his disciples after World War II, which held that a text must be studied independently of the supposed intentions of its author ("Intentional Fallacy"), and of the French Nouvelle Critique from the late 1960s on. In a sense, Proust may be understood as expressing only the usual distaste of writers for the very idea of biographers coming to pry into their private lives after their death. In another sense, it also corresponds to the psychoanalytical idea that a *me* is always a construct, not to be confused with the *subject*, but it also adumbrates the solipsistic notion that the *me* of a human being is never anything else than a fiction, something "that we must make from scratch," an idea which, if taken at face value, would altogether invalidate the very project of biographical research and writing as pointless. No doubt Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* did much to discredit biography as a genre and a serious object of research in France.

Of the same generation as Proust, although fourteen years younger, André Maurois, aka Émile Herzog (1885–1967), was perhaps the most famous French biographer of the first half of the twentieth century. He is a partly forgotten tutelary figure whose influence is paramount in French biography, all the more because it remains unobtrusive. This influence is perceptible in practice, for Maurois quietly set a model of biographical writing that remains recognizable to this day, but also in theory because he produced an important critical essay on biography. *Aspects of Biography* [*Aspects de la biographie*] was the text of his Clarke lectures given at the University of Cambridge in 1927, following in the steps of E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*. Maurois belonged to the same generation as Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf, who made some major contributions to the theory of biography: Lytton Strachey with *Eminent Victorians* and Woolf with "The New Biography," among other essays in *Granite and Rainbow*, where Woolf explains that the biographer's art must be "subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow" (155). Maurois adopts a similar line of argument, considering that biography is a difficult amalgamation of science and art, writing that "a scientific book, perfectly constructed, is a work of art" (*Aspects of Biography* 34). In France, Maurois's biographies came under attack because he practiced "narrative history" before the letter, maintaining that a biography could remain strictly nonfictional while adopting the narrative techniques of the novel. He was reproached with "fictionalizing" the lives he wrote, whereas in his view his biographies were merely what Mikhail Bakhtin called "novelized":

> the absurd and dangerous expression *biographie romancée*. I had never used it; quite on the contrary, I had said that a biographer has no right to invent either a fact or speech, but that he can and must arrange his authentic materials like those of a novel, and give the reader this feeling of discovering the world through a hero, which is the true essence of the novel.

> [l'absurde et dangereuse expression Biographie romancée. Je ne l'avais jamais employée ; au contraire j'avais dit qu'un biographe n'a le droit d'inventer ni un fait, ni un propos, mais qu'il peut et doit disposer ses matériaux authentiques comme ceux d'un roman et donner au lecteur ce sentiment de la découverte du monde par un héros, ce qui est le véritable romanesque.] (*Mémoires* 155)

In the English-speaking world, there is a model of biography that seems to have been less successful in France: the model set up by Leon Edel in his biography of Henry James and defined as early as 1959 in *Literary Biography*, before it was further theorized in *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica*. Edel's fourth principle is that "a biography need no longer be strictly chronological," because "lives are rarely lived in that way," and the reference is overtly literary: "Proust is perhaps a better guide to modern biography than Boswell" (*Writing Lives* 29–30). In fact, the non-chronological principle in Edel's theory rests on the presupposition that a biography is a portrait before it is a story, or, in other words, that its objective is to capture the subject as atemporal Self or Soul, a psychological unit, a transcendental entity. Speaking of the child William Shakespeare when he was a baby, Edel writes: "He was, after all, the baby who was going to write *Hamlet*" (*Literary Biography* xvi). This is the crux of an old debate between French and American biographers, the polemic having been initiated by Leon Edel as early as 1959 in *Literary Biography* when he wrote this statement about Shakespeare and *Hamlet* to substantiate his disagreement with André Maurois's thesis in *Aspects of Biography*: "It is not the business of the biographer to anticipate the discoveries of his hero" (53). Says Leon Edel: "M. Maurois wants us to play a rather curious game of make-believe. When I pick up a biography, [. . .] I cannot pretend, as I read on, that I do not know that this baby—say in Stratford-on-Avon—was not just a baby. He was, after all, the baby who was going to write *Hamlet*" (*Literary Biography* xvi). Paul Murray Kendall entered the debate on André Maurois's side in 1965:

> When Edel talks scornfully of mechanical time, he confuses the measuring instrument with the thing measured. The clock is simply a convenience. Human time means organic change—the grand pattern of growth, maturation, and decay. To abuse that pattern is to abuse the life itself. Human time also means sequential experience, a cumulative process of interaction of the "me" and the "not-me"—of man and the world—creating the continual *becoming* of human character which ends only in death. (*The Art of Biography* 135–36)

The argument rebounded with the new edition of Paul Murray Kendall's *The Art of Biography* in 1985, following Leon Edel's reassertion of his preference for the "violation of all chronology" in his rewriting of *Literary Biography* as *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* in 1984 (*Literary Biography* 149; *Writing Lives* 200). Certainly, Leon Edel was reacting only to André Maurois's text, and it is doubtful whether he was aware that Henri Bergson had used the same obvious example to illustrate his

analysis of precisely this problem in the essay "The Possible and the Real" in *The Creative Mind*, in which he denounced the point of view Edel happens to be defending as the retrospective "illusion" of "the mirage of the present in the past," according to which "the possible would have been there from all time, a phantom awaiting its hour; it would therefore have become reality by the addition of something, by some strange transfusion of blood or life" (Bergson 119–20). In sum, the Edel model tends to implicitly postulate a transcendental ontology of the self that it would be the biographer's aim to grasp, whereas André Maurois and Paul Murray Kendall insist that a biography is rather the unraveling of a subject's life as a process.

For reasons that are perhaps not all superficial or circumstantial, Leon Edel has had a paradigmatic impact in the English-speaking world. What we would be tempted to call the Leon Edel model of biography is more rarely followed in France, where the divergent model epitomized by André Maurois and Paul Murray Kendall observably tends to have greater currency. This is not a question of form, for both models are compatible with either "literary" or "scientific" styles of biography. Hypothetically, this divergence, which is perhaps only a difference of taste, can also be accounted for by reasons relative to the history of ideas and the history of philosophy, which in summary implies a different positioning relative to the notion of "self." This is a different topic, demanding a much longer argumentation, but for the present purpose let it suffice to remark that Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The American Scholar*, with its central notions of "Man Thinking" and "self-trust," inasmuch as it was indebted to European thinking, derived from Kantian and Hegelian idealism, and hardly at all from the materialist atheism of Condorcet and Condillac, or from Destutt de Tracy's. The same holds for Emerson's British friend Thomas Carlyle, whose vision of the world in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (1841) is very close to Emerson's in *Representative Men* (1850).

These historical differences retain to this day a non-negligible degree of relevance. It is certainly one of the reasons why a critical view of the transcendental subject is perceptibly *very French*, not just in the sense of the not so recent, yet still ongoing debate on so-called "French theory" or "poststructuralism" in anglophone academia, but also in the sense that it is congruent with what could be called "the French ideology," as distinct from what Marx and Engels have called "the German ideology." This fault line gives the measure of the specificity of the situation of biography in France, if there is any, at least relative to the English-speaking world. In *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage*, Richard Holmes declares, "I believe in fact that biography itself, with its central tenet of empathy, is essentially a Romantic form" (l. 4476). This, of course, makes sense only up to a certain point, given that neither Plutarch nor Suetonius can be said to have been "romantics." Nevertheless, it makes sense insofar as the Romantic ideology can roughly be equated, as Jerome McGann argues, with the German ideology as Marx sees it: "Where French ideology was critical, anti-religious, rational, and socially progressive, the German was synthetic, fideistic, speculative, and supportive of established power" (8). That for Holmes

"empathy" is a "central tenet" is symptomatic of a turn of mind that gives prevalence to the biographer's quasi-mystical capacity of communion with his subject, by a transposition to biography of the condition of "Poesy" as John Keats saw it: "what shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet [. . .] because he has no identity—he is continually in for, & filling some other Body" (337–38). However, before one can envisage the empathy of selves or souls, one has to agree, *as a matter of fact*, to the existence of a self as an essence of the individual on a transcendental level, or in the words of Destutt de Tracy, on the plane of "what used to be called metaphysics" [Ce que l'on entendoit autrefois par métaphysique] (323). In other words, the problem of the condition of biography in France today may be approached, to begin with, in terms of the Marxist criticism of this exemplum of the German ideology that is Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1845), translated into English in 1907 as *The Ego and Its Own*, and in French as early as 1899 under the title *L'Unique et sa propriété*.

Stirner's egoism, the anarchism of his "Union of Egoists," violently criticized by Marx and Engels in the third part of *The German Ideology*, "Saint Max," epitomizes the very idea of biography that Pierre Bourdieu spoke up against as absurd in "The Biographical Illusion," pointing out that "one can understand a trajectory (that is, the social aging, which is independent of the biological aging although it inevitably accompanies it) only on condition of having previously constructed the successive states of the field through which the trajectory has progressed" (302). Clearly, Bourdieu's diatribe owes much to the Marxist critique of bourgeois individualism, but it is also symptomatic of the long-lasting ideological structure of the literary and academic fields in France. Pierre Bourdieu was the heir of Émile Durkheim's school of sociology, which has long kept at bay the methodological individualism that flourished in the Chicago School in the US, or in Mass Observation in the UK. This has lasted until the 1980s, with the alternative thinking of Raymond Boudon, translator of Georg Simmel, who reopened the question of the science of ideology as Destutt saw it. Those were the days when some academic currents in the social sciences practiced *récit de vie*, partly under the influence of *la microstoria* in Italy, and historians like Paul Veyne, Pierre Nora, or Jacques Le Goff, who diverged from the "long duration" period of the Annales school.

Pierre Bourdieu's 1986 essay "The Biographical Illusion" inscribes itself in the same line of argument, by challenging biography on the ground that "the subject and the object of the biography [. . .] have in a sense the same interest in accepting the *postulate of the meaning* of narrated existence (and, implicitly, of all existence)" (298). In an often-quoted passage, Bourdieu likened traditional biography to the description of "a subway route without taking into account the network structure":

> Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events (sufficient unto itself), and without ties other than the association to a "subject" whose constancy is probably just that of a proper name, is nearly as

> absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure, that is the matrix of objective relations between the different stations. (302)

It is striking that nearly twenty years after Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie*, which marked the starting point of deconstruction, Pierre Bourdieu was still thinking in terms of structure—the "network structure," the "matrix of objective relations"—in a post-structuralist age, while at the same time perceiving, perhaps only by the chance effect of a chosen metaphor, the intellectual fertility, for the theorization of biography, of the notion that a life is something like a "route"—*un trajet*—that is indeed the unique imprint or trace of a given subject. A life, considered as a personal history, is a "process" in the sense that Louis Althusser could say that "Marx owes Hegel this decisive philosophical category, *process*," and that even more "He owes him the concept of a *process without a subject*." In other words, "in Hegel, History is thought as a *process* of alienation *without a subject*, or a dialectical process *without a subject*," that is to say without a human subject. However, Althusser goes on to say, "there is in Hegel a *subject* for this process of alienation without a subject. But it is a very strange subject [. . .]: this subject is the very *teleology* of the *process*, it is the *Idea*, in the process of self-alienation which constitutes it as the Idea" (*Politics and History* 181–83). The Marxist reversal of Hegelian dialectics consists in overthrowing the Idea-as-subject to assert, as Althusser puts it, that "History is an immense *natural-human* system in movement, and the motor of history is class struggle." Yet, Althusser went on to say: "The question about how '*man* makes history' disappears altogether. Marxist theory rejects it once and for all; it sends it back to its birthplace: bourgeois ideology. And with it disappears the "necessity" of the concept of 'transcendence' and of its subject, man." In other words, the kernel of Althusser's intended "epistemological break" consisted in "getting rid of the bourgeois ideology of 'man' as the subject of history, *getting rid of the fetishism of 'man*,'" and of "the exaltation of the *person*" (*Essays in Self-Criticism* 50). This well-known Althusserian stance against so-called "humanist Marxists" dies hard, and it is difficult not to perceive its lingering influence in Pierre Bourdieu's diatribe against biography as the ongoing "illusion" of a "subject" whose "constancy is probably just that of a proper name." To put it differently, in the mid-1980s the opinion was still very widespread among French intellectuals that biography was necessarily on the side of bourgeois ideology in Althusser's sense, and to a large extent a lingering feeling is still there, albeit attenuated by the development of "ego-histoire" and "récits de vie" as forms of methodological individualism in the social sciences.

At least two French authors, not always well served by the existing English translations, provide essential keys to understand an important misunderstanding resulting from the confusion between the notions of "self" and "subject": Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Lacan, in "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," points out that from Descartes to Hegel, "the promotion of consciousness [*Bewusstsein*] as being essential to the

subject" amounts to a conceptual slippage (*glissement*) "by which the *Bewusstsein* [consciousness] serves to cover up the confusion of the *Selbst* [Self]" and which "eventually reveals, with all Hegel's own rigor, the reason for his error in *The Phenomenology of Mind*" (306–307). In other words, the rigor that makes Hegel postulate the *Geist* from the evidence of its phenomenological process, or the rigor that makes Descartes deduce an ontic I from its action of thinking, is for Lacan the slippage that leads to the confusion between the subject as process and the self as concept. Commenting on this same passage from Lacan, Jacques Derrida explains that "this does not only mean 'se tromper' in the sense of 'to make a mistake', but 'se tromper' in the sense of 'to deceive oneself'; lying, self-betrayal as belief, as make-believe in the transparency of the self, or of oneself to oneself" [Cela ne signifie pas seulement un "se tromper" de l'erreur, mais un se "tromper" de la tromperie, du mensonge, du mensonge à soi comme croyance, du "faire croire" à la transparence du moi ou de soi à soi] (Derrida, *L'animal que donc je suis* 188).[9] This is a central issue for biographical theory, inasmuch as it is a crucial juncture between Lacan and Derrida on the question of the subject. The positioning of Derrida's deconstruction relative to Marx's philosophy of history is clarified more particularly in *Marx & Sons*, where Derrida replies to *Ghostly Demarcations*, which grouped the reactions of leading Marxian thinkers to his *Spectres de Marx*. The gist of the argument is that Derrida had undertaken a "deconstruction of Marxist 'ontology'"—"déconstruction de l' 'ontologie' marxiste" (*Marx & Sons* 22)—as a form of "messianism," spectrally projecting the realization of an idea onto the future, or so to speak, and to borrow Bergson's word, a "mirage" of the future on the present.

As we have seen earlier, there has certainly been a historical resistance to biography as a genre among French intellectuals, in line with Althusser's philosophy that implicitly viewed it as an expression of "the fetishism of man." Moreover, and independently from that, there is also, on the side of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derrida's deconstruction, a radical insistence to make a clear distinction between the self as ontic concept and the subject as process. In this intricate zone between several philosophies, at loggerheads with one another more often than not, a misunderstanding is likely to set in. Deconstruction did not challenge biography as such, but would obviously join hands with Marxist philosophy in being de facto critical of a certain traditional practice of biography, still rooted in nineteenth-century hero-worship, that continued to maintain a ritual celebration of great men, and which is attached to an uncritical belief in the transcendental self, whose ideological and religious motivations are none the less obvious when they are silently asserted. However, in a nutshell, deconstruction has nothing to do with "post-truth" politics: it does not consist in saying that truth does not exist, and that therefore all is fiction, and so on. It challenges the concept of the self as a metaphysical construct. Instead of postulating the self as an entity existing *per se*, it insists that a subject's life is *always already—toujours déjà*, translating the German phenomenologists' *immer schon*—a writing, a trace, a trajectory of sorts, not the phenomenal manifestation or hypostasis of a self.

In France as elsewhere, the rare critics who have tried to develop a theory of biography have hardly taken into account these philosophical advances of knowledge, as if the time were not yet ripe to distance oneself from the ideological function to which biography has too long been ancillary. Thus, Daniel Madelénat defines biography as the "art of individuation," saying that it "seems to rebel against the efforts of the 'biographologist' or of the 'metabiographer' who would undertake to geometrize the spirit of delicacy and to rationalize such an unsystematic practice" [L'Art de l'individualisation, la biographie semble rebelle aux visées du "biographologue" ou du "métabiographe" qui entreprendrait de géométriser l'esprit de finesse et de rationaliser une pratique si peu systématique] (Madelénat 12). Although it is not a treatise in "biographology," Madelénat's work has the merit of attempting to study biography in a historical perspective, and in the process he shows how its rise and formalization as a literary genre is simultaneous with the consolidation of individualism in the Western world, which takes particularly strong forms in the English-speaking world.

François Dosse adopts much the same type of approach as Madelénat's, sketching out a history of biography as a literary genre, and not at all as a mode of historiography. Dosse mainly distinguishes three "ages" of biography: the "heroic age," the age of "modal biography," and the "hermeneutic age" (9). According to Dosse, in the "*Heroic Age*," from the days of Plutarch to modern times, biography devoted itself to building portraits of "representative men," as Emerson would later say, and to depict great men as Carlylean "heroes" proposed as so many models. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Dosse envisions an age of "*modal biography*" (213), which aims, through the individual figure, at the "ideal-type" of a given category—for example, the writer, the savant, the great artist—so that the individual is valued as an epitome of a collective body. Finally, the "hermeneutic age," since the last decades of the twentieth century, focuses on the individual subject, looking for the ordinary human being behind the myth or the legend of the extraordinary public figure. Dosse's hermeneutic age is not very far from Leon Edel's "third principle" of biography, which aims at going beyond the "figure in the carpet" to discover the "figure under the carpet" (*Writing Lives* 29–30). Additionally, and partly as a variation of "modal biography," Dosse conceptualizes the notion of "*choral biography*" (284), as a mode of prosopography or more exactly of "group biography," in which the subject does not stand out against the historical context, but is perceived as the result of social forces that are like so many melodic lines in a symphony.

In 2005, the same year as Dosse's *Le pari biographique*, Martine Boyer-Weinmann published *La Relation biographique,* the second part of which is a series of biographical studies of French writers, but the first part is a historical-theoretical essay that approaches the subject of biography with very much the same method as Madelénat and Dosse. One of Boyer-Weinmann's most interesting developments is what she calls "*biographie blanche*" or "blank biography," as another name for what Claude Leroy had called "*abiographie"* (228) in 1989: that is to say *non-biographies*,

in the manner of the non-anniversaries in *Alice in Wonderland*, that operate "like lightning rods" (*à la façon d'un paratonnerre*) deviating and channeling the truths that biography might illuminate. Speaking of the biographies of writers, Leroy said there are two kinds of "abiographies": those that postulate that there is a perfect imperviousness between writers and their works, and those that postulate the contrary. The opposite of the *principle of imperviousness* between the life and the writing is what Philippe Desan calls the *principle of consubstantiality* between the author and the works (67), the origin of which he traces to Montaigne's foreword to the *Essais*: "*Ainsi, Lecteur, je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre*" (27). With this consideration we come around to Proust, who tended to consider, like Montaigne, that his *me* was consubstantial with his works, and used this as an argument in favor of the total imperviousness between his everyday life and his oeuvre.

Biography in France is a lively genre, characterized by a growing readership over recent decades. Since the late twentieth century, many literary awards for biographers have been created, many publishers do biographies, and a considerable number of them have biography series, including some of the "major" French publishers, like Gallimard. At the same time, since the beginning of the twentieth century, there has been a continuing interest in France in the theory of biography, on the subject of which some essays have been published. The question of the individual and of individualism, which is essential to biography as a genre, is also central to twentieth-century French philosophy and so-called French theory, and is directly addressed by Derrida's notion of "the transcendental subject," or Foucault's *Hermeneutics of the Subject*. However, the theory of biography has not yet fully developed, and the most recent studies rest content, more or less, with taxonomies of the various sorts of biographies and the overall history of the genre. There are several explanations for this state of things. Some of them are ideological, in so far as biography is strongly linked to individualism, and therefore to "bourgeois" ideology. There are cultural reasons, as, for instance, that biography is viewed predominantly as an Anglo-American forte. The central question of the Self, which often goes on being perceived more or less overtly in transcendental terms, certainly operates as a philosophical stumbling block, to the point of constituting a scientific problem. On the other hand, one main hindrance to the development of the theory of biography in France resides in the advanced development of the theory of the novel, and the questionable presupposition that, from the formal point of view, the theory of fiction must be valid for nonfiction, as if a story were told in the same way whether it is factual or imaginary. Therefore, to evolve beyond a mere inventory of the categories of the genre, the theory of biography will have to overcome both the epistemological hurdle of the "theory war" that pits the cult of the self against deconstruction, and an erroneous perception of French theory that senselessly considers the motto "*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158) to mean that everything is fiction.[10]

Notes

1. Gustave Lanson, *Hommes et livres: études morales et littéraires* (1896); Ferdinand Brunetière, *L'évolution des genres dans l'histoire de la critique littéraire* (1914); Hippolyte Taine, *Nouveaux essais de critique et d'histoire* (1866); Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Portraits littéraires* (1844, 1876–1878). On Proust's polemic against Sainte-Beuve, compare below and see Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1908). Consider also Moulin, "Lives of the Poets" and "The Life Effect."
2. See, for example, Plekhanov.
3. See also Leduc and Nora, "Pierre Nora."
4. Witness the widespread indignation with which President Sarkozy's proposal to debate the notion of *identité nationale* was received in 2009. For instance, sociologist Michel Wieviorka declared that the very existence of the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity was "an intellectual and political catastrophe" [Je peux vous assurer que c'est une catastrophe intellectuelle et politique pour l'image générale de la France]. See also Wieder; Laborie; Detienne; and Thiesse.
5. On this issue and the distinction between "récit de vie" and "life writing," see Moulin, "'Life Writing.'"
6. My translations from French throughout unless otherwise indicated.
7. See Moulin, "Biography."
8. A private enquiry conducted in 2017, in the preparatory phases of a research project for the Institut Universitaire de France, to determine the most relevant corpus possible for a work of scientific literary criticism applied to contemporary biographers in the UK, in the US, and in France. The project was subsequently limited to modern British biographers as the corpus of its first phase. The initial selection was based on several criteria: the authors had to be confirmed biographers, having won literary prizes in the twenty-first century, and published significant biographies since 2010. A list of up to thirty biographers for each of the three cultural areas was then submitted for the evaluation of the members of the Biography Society and several of its related networks, asking them to rank the top biographers whose works, according to them, deserve to retain attention as objects of academic research. See Moulin, "Biography."
9. Compare my translation with *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, translated by Marie-Louise Mallet.
10. See also Moulin, Phuong Ngoc, and Gouchan, *La Vérité d'une vie biographie*, pp. 7–31.

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