

# Life Course/Writing: An Introduction

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The practice of telling life stories is omnipresent in cultures across the world and encompasses a large variety of genres and media. Life stories may take the form of biographical, autobiographical or hybrid narratives and may deal with historical or fictional characters. Presenting one's own or someone else's life appears to be a cultural universal and continues to spark the interest of many readers. At the same time, this practice confronts those readers with historically situated genres and shifting notions of self and subjectivity, narrative, memory, identity and (social) space.

In *The Life of Infamous Men* (1977), the introductory text to a never finished collection of life stories from 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, Michel Foucault proposed to assemble an “anthology of existences” (Foucault 1979: 76): brief lives of unimportant, obscure and ‘infamous’ men, stumbled upon in books, notes and official documents. In his introduction, Foucault repeatedly described the lives of those marginalized individuals, caught in the prisms of various discourses of (absolutist) power, as intense “life-poems” (Ibid: 78). Although he underlined the real existence of these individuals, the French philosopher was nonetheless fascinated by the “pure verbal existence” (Ibid: 81) of those who, only through their clash with institutionalized power, left behind traces in the “dramaturgy of the real” (Ibid: 78). In discussing the referentiality of historical individuals and the textuality of their “life-poems”, Foucault addresses the complex relationship between writing, literature and historiography, between fact and fiction in a rather ambiguous way. This is evident from the statement that he

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“in no way” presents “a history book” (Ibid: 76) while at the same time he banishes all which could be considered as “imagination or literature” (Ibid: 78). Even though Foucault may not qualify his anthology as ‘literature’ *stricto sensu*, research on biographical and autobiographical texts frequently highlights both the literary, fictional and constructed character of life stories. As Joanny Moulin rightly observed, the authenticity and “life effect” (Moulin 2017: 72) of those stories admired by Foucault emanate not in the least from the specific form used to present the material: through fragmentation, “ruptures, fissures and iterations” (Ibid: 71).

Texts dealing with the life course of historical or fictional protagonists inevitably call attention to their form, narrative features and mediality. In *Reading Autobiography* (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose to divide the heterogeneity of these texts into two categories: ‘life writing’ and ‘life narrative’. The former is taken as a general term “for writing that takes life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (Smith & Watson 2010: 4). In contrast to the written forms of ‘life writing’, Smith and Watson broaden the scope of ‘life narrative’ as a “general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital” (Ibid: 4).

According to Pierre Bourdieu, literature has traditionally influenced the ways in which we conceptualize the notion and trajectory of ‘life’ as such. Indeed, to speak of ‘life stories’, as Bourdieu critically points out in *The Biographical Illusion* (1986), “implies the not insignificant presupposition that life is a story” (Bourdieu 2004: 297):

Life is like a path, a road, a track, with crossroads (Hercules between vice and virtue), pitfalls, even ambushes (Jules Romain speaks of successive ambushes of competitions and examinations). Life can also be seen as a progression, that is, a way that one is clearing and has yet to clear, a trip, a trajectory, a *cursus*, a passage, a voyage, a directed journey, an unidirectional and linear move (‘mobility’), consisting of a beginning (‘entering into life’), various stages, and an end, understood both as a termination and as a goal (‘He will make his way’, meaning he will succeed, he will have a fine career) (Ibid: 297, emphasis in original).

As narratives, life stories imply a chronological and logical order which prompts us to view life as a coherent and finalized whole. Their telling is motivated by the concern to give life meaning and to make its events consistent and significant. Considering this ‘biographical illusion’ as a methodological pitfall for sociological research, Bourdieu points to literature – one may think here of traditional biography or the 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of the *Bildungsroman* – as the main influence: “To produce a life history or to consider life as a history [...] is perhaps to conform to a rhetorical illusion, to the common representation of existence that a whole literary tradition has always and still continues to reinforce” (Ibid: 298). With the advent of modernist fiction and “anti-history” (Ibid: 298), the traditional idea of linear narrative was challenged and generic experimentation and hybridity were advocated, as contemporary research on ‘autofiction’ (Gasparini 2004, 2008), autobiographical novels (Missinne 2013), ‘autobiografiction’ (Saunders 2010a), biographical narration (Braun & Stiegler 2012), memory narrative (Olney 1998) and fictional meta-biography (Nadj 2006) has clearly shown.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, new impulses to the study of auto/biographical texts have been provided by the rise of ‘life writing’ as a critical concept. The term itself is often traced back to Virginia Woolf, who used it in her autobiographical essay *A Sketch of The Past* (1939) in which she tackled the inadequacies of conventional biography (cf. Leader 2015: 1-2, Lee 2005: 100). In contemporary research, the notion of life writing is used in several ways. Zachary Leader defines life writing as a “generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed” (Leader 2015: 1). To this extent not only biographies and autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and auto/biographical fiction, but also letters, official proceedings, marginalia, blogs and even personal entries on social media such as Facebook or Twitter are included. As is evident from

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<sup>3</sup> Narrativity is, however, not exclusively limited to the literary domain. As an essential way of processing reality, it can be considered an integral part of various discourses. See for instance the study of Martinez and Klein (2009) on so-called “Wirklichkeitserzählungen”, which discusses non-literary forms and functions of narration in medical, journalistic, religious, historiographic, political and juridical texts.

Margareta Jolly's *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (2001), which covers two volumes ranging from a to z, the diversity in forms, (sub)genres and national traditions of life writing is immense. As an umbrella term, life writing is often mentioned when "different ways of telling a life story – memoir, autobiography, biography, diary, letters, autobiographical fiction – are being discussed together" (Lee 2005: 100).

Secondly, the concept also pertains to life stories who explicitly question generic boundaries and instigate "generic fusion" (Saunders 2010b: 321), i.e. "when the distinction between biography and autobiography is being deliberately blurred" (Lee 2005: 100). Theoretical essays like Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement" (1979), which considered autobiography not as a strict genre but a specific mode of reading, have contributed to the study of generic problems posed by life writing. According to Leader, this blurring of (generic) boundaries helped to account for the growing acceptance of life writing, "reflecting a wider distrust of fixed forms, simple or single truths or meanings, narrative transparency, objectivity, 'literature' as opposed to writing" (Leader 2015: 2).

Thirdly, the coinage of life writing can be linked to postmodern, postcolonial and feminist "issues of representation" (Kadar 1992: 3). Reminiscent in this regard of Foucault's endeavor to collect the lives of marginalized and unimportant subjects, life writing addresses texts and authors previously excluded from the (white, male) canon. As Marlene Kadar has argued, there are strong synergies between the idea of life writing and the evolution of social, political and literary movements. Life writing thus exceeds the literary notion of 'genre' and can become a "critical practice" (Ibid: 10). Seeking to emancipate "an overdetermined 'subject', or various subject-locations" (Ibid: 12), it can revise the canon. Compared to 18<sup>th</sup>-century "androcentric" (Ibid: 4) ideals of biography and autobiography that privilege narrative regularity and objective truth, Kadar specifically promotes a practice of feminist life writing in order to "correct former misreading's of women's writings" (Ibid: 11) and to humanize the "self-in-the-writing" (Ibid:

12). Meanwhile, the “retrospective justice” (Howes 2017: 165) of life writing, advocated amongst other by Kadar, has been criticized by academic historians and biographers who seek to preserve the biographical-historiographic tradition. According to Renders & De Haan, life writing as an ideology focuses on “misunderstood individuals” who represent “social groups such as women, coloured people, transvestites, victims of the Holocaust and others” (Renders 2014: 172, cf. also De Haan 2014) rather than seeking an increase of ‘objective’, historical knowledge. While life writing and auto/biographical narration may certainly problematize standards of academic biography, they should not, however, be reduced to mere documents of facticity as this would strip the text of its “[...] rhetorical, literary, ethical, political and cultural dimensions” (Smith & Watson 2010: 13). Furthermore, through the discussion of letters, diaries and non-fictional documents, the field has opened up to “non-high culture” (Kadar 1992: 6) and is equally interested in texts and autobiographical voices of non-professional or non-literary authors.

This issue of the *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings* takes as its starting point the different modes and genres through which literary authors narrate and construct life stories. The multilingual approach to this topic, with contributions on Dutch, German, Spanish, American and Italian literatures, addresses a great variety of texts, genres and poetics. Rather than looking at life stories written by ordinary or non-professional men and women, the focal point of this thematic issue lies with literary authors and their respective texts, genres and poetics from a ‘life course/writing’-perspective.

The blurred lines between autobiography and fiction are discussed in **Diana Castilleja**’s reading of the works of Mexican author Angelina Muñiz-Huberman. Considering three novels of Muñiz-Huberman as ‘pseudo-memories’ (‘seudomemorias’), Castilleja shows how the autobiographical identity of the author reveals itself through the leitmotif of exile and is closely related to the structuring principle of fragmentation in her works.

**Dirk Vanden Berghe** addresses the autobiographical writings of Italian author Ardengo Soffici on his symbolic childhood years ('*Infanzia*'). Rather than hailing it as a document of authentic spontaneity, Vanden Berghe reads Soffici's text from an intertextual perspective. Such a reading shows how Soffici's language and style are deeply influenced by literary pretexts and hybridize the autobiographical genre.

In his analysis of Stefan Zweig's *Joseph Fouché*, **Mathias Meert** shows how the life of a prominent political persona is mediated in literature through Zweig's notion of biography. Taking up the life story of Fouché in the generic context of biography and drama, Zweig connects the psychological profile of a political mastermind to the ethical and political dimensions of biographical writing.

The formative role of prison and prison-like environments in the life stories of two fictional characters is analyzed by **Marc Van Zoggel**. In his contribution, concepts of time, space and morality are discussed in two Dutch novels about the Second World War by Hermans and Mulisch. Van Zoggel not only points out how paradigm shifts in the historiography of the German occupation of the Netherlands relate to both authors, but also how both prison narratives present a different outlook on existential captivity.

The selected contributions on the topic of life course/writing look at how the notion of 'life' is imagined, told and studied and address key characteristics of the genres deployed by different authors. They take into account rhetorical actions, narrative acts, sociocultural contexts, historical reception, textual signals of facticity and fiction, blurred boundaries between autobiography and fiction, and the ethics of portraying different lives. Life stories are thus read as complex textual constructs which relate to shifting notions of subjectivity, memory, adaptation, history, intertextuality and authorial 'postures'.

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