

## BIOGRAPHY AND ITS TENSIONS

We are again going through a period of expansion in biographical literature. There is an ever greater number of publications, demonstrating the *libido biographica* of the reading public and also showing the interest of authors for a genre that is often treated with a great deal of care and rigor. This is not the first time in the history of letters, and each of us can find in his library a quantity of ancient, classic or modern works proving the constancy of this production. However, the contemporary phenomenon takes on a different meaning. The appetite for the biographical seems to be directly linked to its value as testimony. We are living in an era of distrust with regard to rules and codes. Every individual is called on to organize his conduct and invent his existence, from which comes, it seems, this need for an example that also expresses a taste for history and a need for more truth than entertainment from the author of biographies.

Doctors, following their master Hippocrates, are people of biography. They can find material in a life story to aid in diagnosis

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

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and prognosis. Their purpose is neither glory nor the theater, but they are the secret biographers of pain.

Recently, ethnologists have also taught us the richness that there may be in the life story of any human being. Some of these accounts have become successful books showing how the relation of a simple but full life can rival with a successful novel.

Psychiatry's recognition of biography, in its never completely successful attempt at understanding the individual, justifies the interest of the clinician in its regard. Our colleagues in letters and the human sciences tell us what biography is for them, how it is the trace that an individual leaves in the memory of others, how the full life is only the realized modality of a great number of imagined trajectories. Mental pathology often puts us in the presence of illnesses that are more "biographical illnesses" than the expression of a localized or partial suffering. The real meaning of a symptom is only perceived in the context of an entire existence. The notion of biography restores a totality where particular analyses create dispersion.

Thus biography as we can understand it is much more than an account or a story. It testifies to the reality itself of personal existence and, by doing so, manifests a certain number of tensions that give it an irresistible interest.

### INDIVIDUAL TENSION AND COLLECTIVE TENSION

In one sense, biography is what concerns the individual as a unique person. In spite of how it sometimes appears, biographies are never interchangeable. They are the mark of the intimate and the impulsive: what I interpret in this story is the manifested expression of an emotional study experienced throughout days and years. This manifestation in some way projects interiority on a public stage, creating a fascinating scene. But this scene is first of all a theater of flesh and blood. The biographical as an aspect of an individual is thus opposed to the collective: the crowd scene is largely organized by culture and history, and it is true that no man is an island. The collective has to do with the biographical, but when it interferes to the point of effacing the individual we are not far from a situation of alienation. In fact, the biographical is what

rejects the collective and only accepts it with reservation. My life cannot be separated from the life of the group, but it also cannot let itself be absorbed to the point of no longer expressing an autonomous existence. The biographical is always more or less revolutionary, although revolutions tend to reduce the part of the individual biographical. The best remedy for a totalitarian or terrorist regime is the calm affirmation of the “inescapable” value of the biographical. In some circumstances it is almost a matter of scandal and provocation: how can one claim to live his life on the margins of a group that denounces as a deviation everything that does not comply with the ideological and practical promotion of that group? In fact, the biographical is the germ of dissidence: it is a fertile germ, because the one who perseveres in his own being exists whatever happens. That does not mean that the intimate and impulsive values of biography are not useful for the group. After all, culture seems to be a product of the privation of impulse. A society of conformist robots is not very efficacious. In a democracy, the affirmation of personality is exercised for the profit of all. It is true that such a society must be able to arbitrate the integration of the singular and the original.

#### THE TENSION OF SELF-INTEREST AND INTEREST IN OTHERS

Human existence has a characteristic that is quite different from that of animals: like life, it is productive, but it produces beyond itself. Thus, to live is enough for life, but for human existence it is more a question of making this life a masterpiece, to produce something good for the individual person but also useful for others. We may say that a well-constructed and well-organized life, one that a biographer may use as testimony, has a value for others in several ways. First, concretely, by being at the origin of a large number of services and exchanges, then by favoring a sort of emulation, indeed, competition, in others. In this perspective, life for others is not an exploited and dependent life; it is a sort of gift and at the same time a means of exciting the impulse of living to the fullest. On the other hand, simulating the approximative or lying have incalculable consequence for others. We cannot really live for ourselves without living for others. Comparing the

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expressions shows the contradiction. On the other hand, one can very well lack the dimension of “otherness” if he is not able to live for himself. This situation remind us of *l'arroseur-arrosé*, a man sprinkling a garden who is himself sprinkled in return, if there were a garden in which water was the vehicle of ethical values.

### THE TENSION OF THE OBJECTIVE

The object of a biography may cause problems, as much from the point of view of its reality as from the possibilities to verify its discretion and sincerity. Is there a truth of biography or instead a “verisimilitude” or a “near-truth”? These terms, somewhat barbarous, only record the inevitable shifting that results from re-writing.

Any biography supposes at a given moment an “absence” in which the biographing action may install itself. There are many sources of possible non-objectivity. As in the hull of an old boat, it is necessary to continuously pump out the water so the boat will not sink. The subjective and ideology are always in the forefront, but there is also the secret that, at any time, may come to interpose its opacity. There is also a more or less voluntary falsification that imposes its marks and weaknesses. In fact, the intention of the biographer must always be taken into account, so as to at least detect the more flagrant lapses from the initial purpose. Some biographies would be mere investigations. They are as boring as can be and endowed with such a status of exteriority that, actually, it is no longer a question of biography.

Logical exposition and hagiography are more attractive. They no doubt take us far afield from what we were to be shown, but there is some consolation in not feeling duped. Demythification always has the effect of non-pertinence following a stilted or debonnaire personality cult: any biographical mystery that disappears seems full of triviality, to the point that we wonder if we have really gained anything by the revelation. The intention to explain or exemplify is not lacking in interest, but it is very difficult to achieve. There are some successes that in reality depend on the intellectual territory inhabited by the reader. In fact, it might be necessary to agree that if objectivity as understood by the

fundamental sciences is possible, an acceptable biography is the one that combines all the aforementioned defects plus a good measure of ingenuity opposed to the number of events and their recapturing. At that moment, the reader has in his hands a text that may be to his liking, if he is an intelligent and discerning reader. In any case, any biography is a tension between a fully-lived life and other trajectories dreamed, hoped for or outlined that sometimes bring much more than their realization: the mark of a personality.

#### TENSION BETWEEN CONTINUOUS AND DISCONTINUOUS

This is not a matter of finding an illustrated problematic as in the physics of waves and corpuscles through the works of Louis de Broglie or Max Planck. Much more modestly, the tension we refer to reveals the opposition between a blended view (in the cinematic sense) of biography with regard to a view marked by discontinuity. The blending occurs in the search for a structure, that is, something to give consistence to the figures we see on the stage in a biography. For example, we can divulge in an existence, as in a work of fiction, the structure based on transgression followed by punishment and repentance, redemption, or a fall from grace, or on a quest or search for origins. In this way, we can see an entire existence organized around some psychological motifs, analogous to musical motifs. The result is a harmonious composition but one whose validity must be questioned. Because the other way to observe an existence is to note events, to follow the lines of rupture or “metanoic” moments. Here the accent would be placed on what changes, what refuses continuity. We may speak of accident, but the real question is, what is there of importance in this discontinuous phenomenology with regard to a slower evolution translating a guide structure that is constant? Is biography the daughter of continuity or of discontinuity? The answer is that there are undoubtedly classic examples and stages: the idea for a life is not enough, since if we do not change our ideas, the ideas change of themselves. What makes St. Vincent de Paul a saint at the end of his life perhaps does not have the same rapport with his biography as what justified his initial engagement. We tend to

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confuse some biographical “spasms” with the perseverance of attitudes that are always identical. If it were a question of figures in the history of literature, religion, crime, or what have you, how could it be possible that immutable principles had resisted fundamentally different atmospheres and situations? Only pathology gives us fixity. On the contrary, normal life is full of possibilities, changes and flexibility. That does not mean that the normal man is a chameleon but that certainly his procedure between the factors of persistence and elements of readjustment and adaptation is perpetual. From this point of view, any biography is somewhat Darwinian.

### TENSION BETWEEN MEANING AND NON-MEANING

It is true that we are accustomed to finding at least one meaning for our existence, that is, we assume the flux of situations that we have experienced as our own with the ability to realize them and justify ourselves. This existence is far from being uniform or uniformly accelerated. It goes through progressions and regressions in periods of conflict. The dynamism of one individual is opposed to the dynamism of another following strategic lines where he can recognize himself whatever the outcome of the confrontation. This recognition is healthy. It is not the same when absurdity or hazard are evoked, when one gives up being the director of his own existence. The biographical result is disastrous. Life is lived and drawn out like the steps of a drunken man. There is no reason that there be more logic in the written word than on a street corner. Even time does not arrange the affair. In fact, the chronological factor, aging, never succeeds in masking absurdity or organizing the unformed.

However, any existence, thus any biography, could have somewhere the possibility of a return to a certain unity that would be the personality or at least the personage and that distinguishes the human being from the animal. This is without a doubt its historicity. In practice, it is not within his ability to detach himself from it. A man without a history would be a man without a shadow, almost the absence of a man. It is not easy to write biographies of the absence of a person, but sometimes the effort is

made so that absurdity wins over sense. The result is not perhaps the one desired, but it is there: nothing is understood, because there is nothing left to grasp.

#### TENSION BETWEEN REALITY AND PLEASURE

We have often wondered if biography is useful, which means that it brings something more to reality, that it allows understanding, that in addition to being an art it is a means of clarifying. This aspect unquestionably exists, but it is not the only one to prove this utility. A biography may be a means of redress. For example, the survivors of a dramatic incident or holocaust are called on to testify in order to show the strength hidden in human fragility. The executioners also testify, but now their voices are inverse to their former power. This is also a form of redress. Biography is equally a strategy of memory, a defence. It allows some who were mistreated at some moment to appeal to this very illusory tribunal of history. Some have lived only in expectation of this. Did they calculate well? That is the question. The fact that the problem arises indicates that in spite of all they have not lost everything. We could not say of biography that it is of no use if it had no other ends than a slightly unhealthy pleasure of some voyeur or fetishist reader, patiently gathering something that happened at ten past noon on a certain day. In reality, pleasure is no less real than anything else, and if our contemporaries take such interest in reading or publishing biographies, perhaps we should see in that a convergence of all these causes.

In fact, we can agree with the established fact that nothing in the life of a person deserves to be retained or, inversely, lost. This position of indifference rests on the infinite pettiness of our actions that several decades cannot make more important or solemn. It is better to give life a reasonably optimistic dimension and so decide that this existence, in any case biographical, is worth keeping. After all, the important thing is to remain oneself and be oneself with others. Prometheus is much more our hero than Epimetheus, but Prometheus was mistaken in reaching so high.

Biography is always relatively humble, indeed, somewhat painful. The *éclat* of the *Te Deum* must be very loud to cover up

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the moaning of the wounded and dying. But perhaps the error lies in wanting to cover it up? Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote what is beyond a doubt one of the high points of his work in *A Letter From Lord Chandos*. His personage, a young British lord, wrote to his mentor, the chancellor Bacon, to excuse himself for having broken with him: "I was not well," he says in substance, "and thus each meeting I had instead of adding to my being took something away from it. Thus I had to withdraw so as not to disappear altogether."

We may wonder, but this is only a question, if biography does not play this role of supreme withdrawal with regard to the one who is its subject. Thus, after a biography, we would have nothing left of the person except what is in his biography. The other would have been absorbed. A dilemma apparently solved without too much effort if we take into account the abundance of the production in this field.

Yves Pélicier  
(*Hôpital Necker, Paris*)