

BIOGRAPHY, OR LIFE AS A STORY

Biography is a story, and a story is something that is meant to be told. It is thus quite evident that biography is the tale of a life: a life-story (*Lebensgeschichte* in German). But then the question arises as to what exactly is a story and how apt is it for representing life within the limits of this representation as compared to other representations of life: the painted or written portrait, the private diary, the oral or tape-recorded interview, the *curriculum vitae*, the anthropometric file or the epitaph, which at least has the merit of being concise.

LIFE AS A STORY

The existence of biography as the story of a life implies a whole series of conditions of possibility. The first, because the most fundamental, is no doubt the necessity for there to be a certain distance between the teller and the told, always present even in autobiography. It is even more so when another person's life is being recounted, whether this distance be relatively reduced, as in

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the case of the biographer-witness (Boswell for Doctor Johnson), or that the distance extend so far as decades or even centuries between the biographer and his subject. The biography is an *action of absence*, meaning that it implies memory, according to the definition given it by Pierre Janet.

The reference to Janet is not unintentional. It is in the light of the 1928 course on “the development of memory and the notion of time” that we understand better that a biography, or better, the biographical activity, implies a highly developed stage of human memory and thus of all those who preceded it. It is necessary first of all that there be *memory*, that is a recent and ingenious human invention, as Janet says, completely different from simple repetition, and which allows speaking to others about what they have never seen nor experienced, which he calls the activity of the sentinel who returns to report to his chief that which he alone has seen.

But it is also necessary that memory reach the stage of *narration*, the activity capable of preserving events of the one who has disappeared. As Janet states, it is narrative, and not simple recitation, that has created humanity. However, it is also necessary that the biographer be capable of situating a multiplicity of incidents in one and the same individual and of bearing the form and the contents for all the time needed so that they be accessible to his listeners who have never seen or heard of any of it. This is what Janet called *guiding the basket of apples*, much more difficult and thus higher in the hierarchy than carrying a basket or carrying apples.

And finally it is necessary that this multiplicity of events be an ordered series, in other words that *the time of the story* be invented and particularly the notion of the present, much more complicated, Janet notes once again, than the simple sense of duration.

If biography is such a complex activity, it is possible to entertain several doubts about its fidelity to what is immediate in life. Other doubts are just as legitimate regarding its fidelity to what is truly private and individual in this life, for biography is not only a fact of a highly developed humanity. It is also, to a very high degree, a *social object*.

Janet has underlined the social nature of memory and of everything that derives from it. The guiding of the narrative and

of biography as such is an eminently social act. Even if we accept without problem the social value of the tale of the sentinel, we could rightly contest its validity for biography with its fundamental concern for things that have disappeared and *a priori* become useless. There would be a certain legitimacy to this objection if the purpose of the biographer was primarily to provide true information about a deceased individual or to make this person better understood by those who, ordinarily, did not know him. But his purpose is instead to excite not just additional superfluous knowledge, but the feelings of those who were absent during the efforts, the expectations and the triumphs of the person whose life is being related. This is the objective and the reward of the autobiographer—to bring back up, in a form of ruminative regurgitation, all those affective experiences that he had felt somewhat peripherally during the heat of the action and that he attempts to re-examine and taste to the full.

The indicators of the socialization of the biographer are multiple, and we will limit ourselves to only a few. The first is no doubt that there is a *history of biographies* and that each society has those that it prefers. Perhaps the earliest societies had only biographies of the gods, but biographies of statesmen and orators appeared at the time of Plutarch. With the Renaissance and Vasari, artists had their biographies, and, as Bonnet shows, it was around the middle of the eighteenth century that there especially developed a biographical interest in men of letters. It is only much more recently that entertainment stars have reached this stage. Biographies sometimes help understand the individuals to whom they are devoted, but even more do they help to understand the society that produces them.

Nothing today more clearly illustrates the fact that the biography contains a *social value* and contributes powerfully to the prestige of its hero than the jealous concern of actors and actresses to produce (or have produced) a more or less imaginary biography. As such the biography can thus quite naturally be the source of struggles. Rousseau devotes his *Dialogues* to the plot of the false and calumnious biographies that were attributed to him, and he requests that at his death an autopsy be performed to prove that he was not the debauched person that he had been accused of being. To really know the truth about a man, his body is more

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important than his story. One hundred years later, President Schreber also demanded an autopsy in order to demonstrate the truth of his memoirs through the supposed anomalies of his nervous system.

There is nothing surprising, then, in the fact that biography creates a *strategy*, a determinant moment of which is the choice of one's biographer by a great man: Boswell for Johnson, Eckermann for Goethe. President Reagan, it was recently written in the press, had just chosen his biographer. Similarly there is the problem of the selection of a great person by a self-designated biographer. There is a certain fascination at play here, often positive but sometimes negative, as in the case of Wilson by Bullitt in the study that he wrote in a more or less real concert with Freud.

A recent invention of humanity and one of humanity's technical achievements, biography is as appreciated by the person whose story is being told, if he is still alive, as it is by those to whom this story is being told. This is due to his social position. But in recent decades, biography has entered the *age of suspicion*.

THE WEAKNESSES OF BIOGRAPHY

The suspicion in question here has nothing to do with possible inexactitudes in the biography. There no doubt are false biographies, but it would be sufficient to keep the true ones and to correct the false. The problem touches, rather, on the validity and the fecundity of the concept of biography. This is not a problem of fact but a problem of right, of the right of claiming to represent a life and even the living of that life.

It is no doubt contemporary *literary criticism*, or that which it has become, that introduced this suspicion, by asking if the biography of an author helped to understand his work. The object of fascination that the biography of an author (and also his autobiography; the word, it is said, comes from Southey, in 1809) had become in the eighteenth century was transformed in the nineteenth with Sainte-Beuve into a scientific object, and the life of the author was presumed to explain his work. We know that the opposite reaction, initiated by the authors themselves—Mallarmé, Valéry ("everything that history can observe is insignificant") and

also Proust—developed within the framework of structuralism in the Sixties. An entire part of segment literary criticism expelled the real author from his work, considered as pure text, without psycho-biographical significance and thus without biographical determinism. Gérard Genette, concluding that Beyle is a Stendhal character, denounces “the biographical illusion”.

Certainly this does not inhibit the continuously increasing number of available biographies, ever more fascinating to the great mass of readers, even before the present decline of structuralism. But perhaps this is the fascination for the fetish that, by taking the part for the whole, fails precisely to recognize the latter. Does the biography of an author help understanding his literary work or rather does it lead us to pass by the enigma that it is by reducing it to the product of a life, through the same naturalist illusion that formerly made some believe that thought is a product and even a secretion of the brain?

Suspicion does not only affect the efficacy of the biography but also concerns its nature. Biography is a story, but what is a *story*? Apparently a story consists in reporting a series of events in a temporally ordered manner, whether these events are selected freely in the fictional story or whether their actual succession is recorded in the biographical or autobiographical narrative. The story is, thus, a *diachronic reality*.

But with the structural analysis of the Russian school, with the work of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes and Bremond, the story was attributed a synchronic organization under the superficial diachronic organization. Stories obey a more or less hidden structure, a code, and the infinite variety that is attributed to them is in fact enclosed within narrow limits. A story is first of all combinative and much more than simply a representation of random chance. This structural analysis and the combinative structure it brings to light can be placed at more or less complex levels. In the interpretation by Todorov and Greimas, for example, every story seems to consist in three types of relationships, not between characters but between *agents*: the desire of the hero-subject for the value-object, the communication of a donor to a receiver; the aid of the helper or the obstacle of the opponent in the struggle.

It is not really important whether we opt for one or the other

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version of structural analysis. The essential point is that, if biography is a story—and it is—its organization only secondarily depends on the hero chosen and on the particular details of his life; it primarily obeys the rules of the literary genre that is story. Every biography could in this way be pre-programmed according to a single and universal diagram, for example, that of the hero seeking a certain value. In other words the biography, because it is a story, does not line itself up with intrinsic rules of the life of the individual whose story is being told, but with the rules for a literary genre that is, for better or worse, its own.

There is one other weakness in biography. This is that biography has as touchstone *the event*, and the biographical story is a narrative of events. But the importance taken on by the notion of event with the recent development of the “life-events method” has had as countering effect a more critical way of looking. A seminar organized by Guyotat and Fedida on the notion in question saw expressed an entire series of hesitations, and, as Cottraux writes, the event is not a concept beyond all suspicion. To the extent that biography operates necessarily with events, the latter could well be its Achilles tendon.

The essential point is that, contrary to the usual definition, the event is quite far from being simply what “happens” to the subject. One reason is that many events are at least partially provoked and *produced* by the subject, sometimes consciously and openly, but sometimes also in a more subtle manner. In the particular but exemplary case of psychiatric hospitalization, apparently passively experienced by the subject and even imposed on him, Fontana has fully shown that often it formed a private element, more or less unconsciously chosen, within a strategy of adaptation to a situation that had become unbearable.

But more generally, even when the subject does not produce the event, consciously or not, it is he who *constitutes* it as such, if only because the segmenting of lived experience into units of events can often be done only through reference to him. The battle of Waterloo was perhaps a single event for Napoleon, but for Fabrice it was a whole series of events: hearing the cannon fire, meeting the canteen-attendant, the Emperor’s passing by, the guard on the bridge, the arm wound inflicted by the hussar.

Finally the event is only important through its *significance* for

the subject. This is why the life-events methods, with Brown, began to reject prior lists of events and to entrust to an "expert", based on an interview with the subject, the burden of deciding if it is or is not an event depending on the type and degree of threat experienced through it.

But if it is the subject who decides the event in this way, biography falls into a *vicious circle*: it includes the subject by narrating what happened to him, but it is capable of saying what happened only after having already heard from the subject.

THE USE OF BIOGRAPHY IN MEDICINE

Doctors have always been concerned with the biography of their patients. They are meritorious for doing this, since, unlike great figures, a sick person, that is the ordinary person, often has nothing more extraordinary to relate than this sickness. But instead of truth, in this anamnesis, the doctor seeking antecedents is preferentially and even exclusively interested in the pathological elements of the biography rather than in the biography as a whole. Sometimes impatient with an ailing person who spends too much time dwelling on details judged irrelevant to his normal life, the physician seeks the history of the disease or diseases rather than the history of the sick person, even when the result of this anamnesis does not reach the monumental proportions of the *Health Journal of the Great King*, day by day, from 1643 to 1711. An authentic interest in biography in its totality hardly exists other than with psychiatrists, psychosomaticians and also generalists, that is those doctors who recognize a *meaning* in disease, even though with otherwise diverse points of interest.

Here we will limit ourselves to several remarks on the use of biography in the realm of psychiatry. In the already-mentioned seminar, a brilliant presentation by Gladys Swain reviewed the successive uses of the *event* in the history of psychiatry, in which she recognized schematically three phases. At the beginning with Pinel, for example, the event was everything or almost everything since, all alone and by itself, it can bring on madness. With the development of the notion of reaction and the reactional condition, it was necessary to make room for the subject who

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shares the causality for madness with the event. At present the primacy of the psychic structure reduces the event to the congruous portion, and it is no longer anything more than the revealing fact, the mirror in which the subject sees himself and becomes what he is and, in truth, has been since (almost) forever—which explains that strong hesitation provoked by the life-events methods. This history of psychiatry in its appreciation for the role of the event does not fail to evoke the role of literary criticism, first of all devoted to the “biographical illusion”, and turning itself away from this at present, perhaps somewhat excessively. But this is also an aspect of Freud’s evolution as he yielded for a while to this “biographical illusion” with the theory of infantile sexual traumatism before abandoning it later.

In one essential domain of psychiatry, that of *psychoses*, the use of biography also has an instructive history. For a long time psychoses, understood as diseases *stricto sensu* in a sense similar to that of somatic medicine, were situated somewhere outside of biography. The psychopathology of Jaspers gave biography a determinant significance in the definition of psychoses, even if this use of biography is essentially negative. For Jaspers, in fact, a psychosis exists when there is a *process*, that is when there is a breaking off and discontinuity in the biography, when it is impossible to understand the psychotic present out of the past that preceded it. Recourse to biography is required in order to recognize psychoses, precisely because of its uninventiveness.

The position of Jaspers was superseded when it was recognized that biography helps in understanding and in treating psychotics. But it is not a matter here of *external biography*, that of the event, but rather of what Binswanger called *internal biography* (*innere Lebensgeschichte*), which is that of the *situation*. To live means being within a situation, or rather constituting a situation, “situationing” (*situieren*), using Tellenbach’s terms. Biography is a succession of situations, each one of which proceeds from the preceding one and surmounts it by going beyond it. Psychosis occurs when a situation is not surmounted, when it remains rigid, when it immobilizes the biography (instead of fracturing it, as Jaspers thought) and makes itself subject to all previous development. But this biography is not what happens to the subject; instead it is subjectivity correctly understood.

And in this way we can reach a somewhat paradoxical formulation that can serve as conclusion with regard to the use of biography in psychiatry, but no doubt elsewhere also. We should not say, "Recount someone's biography and you will understand who he is". Instead we should say, "Understand who someone is and you will be able to recount his biography".

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