« Conversation with Clare Brant et Max Saunders, founding members and co-directors of the Centre for Life-Writing Research (King's College London) »

Conversation with Clare BRANT et Max SAUNDERS
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Bruno Tribout: As part of the 'Écrits de soi' project (CELLF / Sorbonne Université), currently looking at methodological approaches and terminology questions in life-writing research across European countries in a comparative perspective, we are interested in the activities of major centres such as the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King's College London.

Max Saunders: When we set up the Centre, we did so partly because there were several colleagues at King's College London who had written literary biographies (David Nokes on John Gay, then Jane Austen; Leonee Ormond on Tennyson; me on Ford Madox Ford, and Clare contributed to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, on William Huntington SS, for instance), and we thought that there would be enough shared interest in life-writing. Clare, for instance, was working on letters at the time. We were very concerned that the focus should be on research, as reflected in the Centre's name, rather than on practitioners, people writing biographies primarily. We were interested in developing research on life-writing in all kinds of directions, not simply having people presenting examples of the life-writing that they were doing. We have developed research in several areas and had various series of events and talks, for instance exploring overlaps with adjacent disciplines.

But in more recent years, the Centre has been very much characterised by projects, and also by the affiliate members that we have attracted, some of whom have brought projects to the Centre. We had a series on 'Medical Lives' with Prof. Brian Hurwitz, for example, and an event on 'The Writer's Diary' organized by Jerome Boyd Maunsell in 2014, which featured Sarah Churchwell, Katherine Bucknell and David Plante. There are a number of exciting projects attached to the Centre at the moment that are quite diverse. We have broadened the scope from biography, and have been doing work on a range of other aspects of life-writing, for example Clare's fantastic project called 'Strandlines', looking at the intersection of life-writing and place, in particular in the place where we happened to be working, this extraordinary street in London called the Strand, with all kinds of layers of histories and histories of life-writing, that we wanted to bring to light and use as a research tool. There are a number of other projects as well: the most recent one that both Clare and I were involved with was the project 'Ego Media' (2014-2019), to which we will return later perhaps.

Clare Brant: 'Life-Writing "from Below"' is another ongoing project, a very European one, which is a particular research interest of Timothy Ashplant, who is attached to the Centre. He is working on a reader of the best theoretical and critical material to approach that subject as it pertains across Europe. We have had small conferences and workshops, one with European colleagues entitled 'Life Writing from Below in Europe: Comparative Perspectives' (17 June 2014), with Nathalie Ponsard (Université Clermont Auvergne) among others – I had no idea that the lives of railway workers were such a live topic in France! And this is an instance of trying to take life-writing back a bit. I have another research life as an eighteenth-century researcher, so I am mindful that there is some life-writing in the eighteenth-century

critical world about celebrity particularly, but not as much as there might be given the wealth of possibilities. So, the kind of long early modern history has been picked up by 'Life-Writing "from Below"', going back to Medieval peasant narratives for instance, which is all very helpful. We have also worked with a group of colleagues who have been interested in particular topics, such as life-writing and death, for which we did a special issue for the *European Journal of Life Writing* (vol. 9, 2020). The Centre's links with this journal are very important. I am an editor and Max is on the board. I am also an editor for the 'Creative Matters' section, where academics can reflect on practice and practitioners can reflect on theory. It is a nice melting pot, very open and experimental. We also put together a *Festschrift* for Philippe Lejeune (vol. 7, 2018) and a special issue on life-writing and digital (vol. 8, 2019). So, there is a sense of publications associated with the Centre that come out of networks that are quite informal, people we know or we find, or who find us, and then there is a centre of gravity that is enough for a publication, and that's been a very productive and enjoyable way to share all kinds of crisscrossing intellectual threads around a common theme.

Max Saunders: A couple of other events that I wanted to mention in addition to those were ones we had on group biography, which were led by Lara Feigel around 2013, and included A.S. Byatt, Robert Irwin, Michael Holroyd, and Jeremy Harding among others. There was a lot of interest in group biography at the time, which seems to have receded a little bit now; it seems a good example to us of an area where people were working at the cutting edge of biographical theory, trying to do different things with the form and trying to think about it differently. The writers' diary event worked in a similar vein by bringing new attention to the diaries of literary writers and the kind of things one might be able to say about those. I think in those cases we didn't have publications coming from them, but there were very lively network events, and give you an idea of both the diversity and the sense of trying to push the boundaries of life-writing as a field.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: Was biography, not autobiography, the starting point and the main focus of the Centre?

Clare Brant: We are also interested in autobiography. Besides letters, I had worked on eighteenth-century women's writing, where questions of voice and genre appear regularly. I am currently using autobiography more, for a forthcoming book, *Underwater Lives*. It draws on a large body of underwater life writings and memoirs; also interspecies encounters, which some suggest are posthuman memoirs. Part of the interest for life writing is how much the filter can best be understood not through individuality, but typicality. Diver meets octopus, for instance. Categories seem to have as much or more power than subjectivities.

Max Saunders: Yes; I think our work has probably been more interested in the intersections of biography and autobiography than in separating them. I've worked on the relationships between autobiography and fiction. In many ways that came out of the research on Ford – writing a biography of someone who wrote autobiography as well as biography, and who fictionalised both of them! Writing like his makes one aware of how biography is often displaced autobiography – and vice versa.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: When would you say that 'life-writing' as a critical term came into use in academia in the U.K. (we do not have in French a direct equivalent encompassing both biography and autobiography, and these are two separate fields which are never really researched alongside each other in French academia)?

Clare Brant: It emerged in the 1990s in the U.K., and I think of it as coming from America in the 1980s as a way of describing how to get biography and autobiography into the literary canon. In that period, I think of works such as Marlene Kadar's edited collection of *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (1992); Donald Winslow's edited volume on *Life-Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms* (2nd ed., 1995), which provides a 68-page glossary, followed by a bibliography of books on the different subgenres of life writing; and then Margaretta Jolly's magnificent *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing*. That's the first phase; and then the second phase, again coming from America, saw the term being picked up in relation to identity politics in works on trauma, on witnessing, on underrepresented voices, particularly women, Black people and other ethnicities. And then, at the turn of the 20th century, there was the digital moment and now there is a moment in which life-writing is being used as a frame for thinking in the Anthropocene.

Max Saunders: We founded the Centre in 2007 and by then 'life-writing' had arrived enough for it to be the obvious name for us to use.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: Before the 1990s, was there another umbrella term for biography and autobiography?

Clare Brant: I don't think there was one. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives an example from a 1997 article in the New York Times Book Review: 'Virginia Woolf has very mixed feelings about biography or "life writing", as she called it.' (8 June 1997, 13/1) The inverted commas (which were not there in Virginia Woolf) show caution, even in the *New York Times* in 1997. As an undergraduate, I remember writing an essay on Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, with almost no sense of biography or autobiography! There were some complications around first person: authors had personae, and personal history, we knew that! In fact, the IABA, which was the big global spearheading for dissemination or export of the concept of life-writing, still have in their title the two terms – the International Auto/Biography Association.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: And when did the slash come about? Or, to put the question differently, before the advent of 'life-writing', was it obvious for an English speaker that biography and autobiography were strongly linked? Were biography and autobiography researched separately beforehand, and do you think 'life-writing' reinforced a connection which seems obvious today?

Max Saunders: If you look at the historical examples in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first time autobiography is used, people are really worried about it: it doesn't sound right and it is partly because it is a form that is emerging at the end

of the 18th century, when people are beginning to want to talk about different ways of writing about themselves, but they don't know what to call it. One suggestion was 'self-biography' – there is a sense that this is a kind of biography, and it is just what you put in front of it that distinguishes it from biographies of other people. But it was very difficult to find a way of talking about both autobiography and biography. I think one of the crucial texts is by Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (1994), and that really gave that form of the portmanteau word currency.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: My sense is that, initially, the IABA was essentially looking at autobiography and that it gradually became interested in biography as well. When you were PhD students, were there academics specialised in the field and were they looking at either biography or autobiography, or both?

Max Saunders: My experience as an academic in the 1980s and 1990s was that there was very little work in Britain within the academy on life-writing, on the theoretical side of it. There were some grand old academics who wrote biographies, but writing biography or working on life-writing was considered a rather disreputable thing to be doing and there was a feeling that what you should be doing was theory, and not something so liberal humanist and old fashioned. There were occasional books by people like Roy Pascal and John Sturrock on autobiography, but there wasn't a 'field' of life writing or auto/biography studies like there is now. There were more books coming from America by people like James Olney, and in retrospect we can see the field emerging. But it didn't feel like that at the time. On a different tack, for me, the great attraction of life-writing as a term was not only that it brought together autobiography and biography, but that it allowed a lot of other forms in as well, for instance work like Clare's on letters or work other people were doing on diaries, Memoirs or reminiscences and all these forms that do not necessary fit in the genres of biography or autobiography; they could all be seen within the same frame and part of the same discourse. And, again, I think that Laura Marcus' book on auto/biographical discourses has allowed that jump, because there was a sense that the field might be shaped mainly by autobiography and biography, but there were discourses that covered other subjects, included other forms as well.

Bruno Tribout: In what ways would you say that your Centre differs from other research centres dealing with life-writing in the U.K., such as the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing?

Max Saunders: The Oxford Centre for Life-Writing also has a very wide programme. Kate Kennedy, its acting director, is a musician as well as a life-writer, and so she unites those two fields. Under Hermione Lee, the main emphasis was probably biography, but I think this has broadened out now. Alongside the terminological complexities about auto/biography and life-writing, there is also the different terminology of life-writing centres: in Britain, we have Centres for not just life-writing, but there was a Centre for Life Narratives at Kingston University; there's a Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research at Sussex, and a Centre for Life Writing and Oral History at London Metropolitan University. And what is at stake here, in relation to the interface with other disciplines, is that life-writing tends to be particularly associated with English departments or literature

departments, whereas life history clearly has a more historical emphasis; life narrative can be that or it can relate to narratology or cultural studies, or more specific fields such as trauma studies or working with refugees.

Clare Brant: It might be helpful to place the rise of life narrative around the time that grand narrative declines. Perhaps the most visible form of life history has been in databases and associated work, for instance by Tim Hitchcock, on vagrant/poor lives in London and the Old Bailey Online database. The Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research (University of Sussex), run by Margaretta Jolly, has done great things, and they are particularly associated with oral history, partly through Margaretta's own work and partly because they are physically placed and intellectually close to the Mass Observation Project, until recently led by Dorothy Sheridan, so they have a long history of oral history as a form of life-writing to draw on, and they still actively solicits life-writing. For instance, one year, every day, they had put out a call for diary entries for that day. So, that is how they are different from us.

Bruno Tribout: How important would you say debates on life-writing terminology and taxonomy have been historically, and currently are, in the U.K.? In France, terms such as 'autofiction' have sparked ongoing critical discussions. Are you observing similar conversations in the U.K.?

Clare Brant: No, although, because life-writing is such a capacious umbrella term, there are subject-specific discussions. For example, I have been involved with some German researchers thinking about ecology, and they wish to be very precise about eco-narrative and the use of the term (international workshop on 'Ecocritical Life Writing in the Dystopic Present', 20 May 2019; 5-6 December 2019, Augsburg, Germany, the proceedings of which have been edited by Ina Batzke, Lea Espinoza Garrido and Linda M. Hess: *Life Writing in the Posthuman Anthropocene*, 2021). So, there are arguments about terminology within particular areas of life-writing, but less arguments perhaps about the terminology of life-writing itself. I think that how people further the subject is by working their patch. I have been involved with setting up a research network about hybridity of text and image with Arnaud Schmitt (Université Bordeaux Montaigne and LARCA, Université de Paris) and we are currently organising an international and interdisciplinary conference on 'Hybridity in Life Writing: How Text and Images Work Together to Tell a Life', which will take place at the Université de Paris, from 7-8 July, 2022 (keynote speaker: Teresa Bruś, Wrocław University, author of *Face Forms in Photography and Life Writing of the 1920s and 1930s*, forthcoming). I have been reading about the language of life-writing as applied to photography, and what you see is that there is an absence of helpful terminology, so we need to argue about it in order to make some useful working terms; there is plenty of linguistic work going on and needing to be done.

Max Saunders: One of the things that happened to us with 'Ego Media' was that, at the moment when we embraced the term life-writing as this wonderfully capacious term that would allow us to discuss all the forms we wanted, then life-writing migrated into areas where it didn't seem to be writing anymore, and so we spent a lot of time talking in 'Ego Media' about whether we could describe as life-

writing things like selfies, where you are faced with pure image, and in what sense such things were texts at all. Similarly with narrative: the fall-back position was that they might not be writing, but they are still narrative, but then even that got pushed to the limit where some of the narrative components were so fragmentary, so micro, that they don't really feel like a narrative anymore or that their narrative status is arguable. So, there were interesting terminological discussions. But, talking earlier, Clare and I were wondering whether our discussion with you would only confirm the kind of prejudice that the English were very untheoretical, delivering pragmatic outcomes and not interested in the exact terminology.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: Don't you think it would be better to use critical terms in relation to the periods that gave birth to them? For instance, applying 'autofiction' to works written in the early 20th century, whereas the term was coined much later, does not make a lot of sense. In this perspective, your work, Max, around 'autobiografiction', involves thinking on terminology and poetics.

Max Saunders: Yes; my interest in terms like 'autobiografiction' came out of a project looking at the way modernist writers were using life-writing forms, so it very much came out of my association with the Centre for Life-Writing Research and realizing that things I had often thought of as very distinctive of modernism (which was often seen as anti-biography and anti-life-writing) were challenged by the fact that modernist writers were playing all kinds of games with life-writing; but it was very hard to describe that, because the terminology for modernism didn't really allow it. And then discovering that Stephen Reynolds (1881-1919) coined that term right at the moment when modernism was beginning to develop and come into focus seemed a good way into that area. What that work left me feeling was that, yes, terminology is important, but not because you are trying to find the right term to describe the same thing always, but because the terminological complexity opens up the different kinds of activity going on. And what I loved about that research was finding out how many different ways you could put together autobiography and fiction. Exactly as you said, autofiction as people were doing it in the 1970s and 1980s is just one kind of hybrid, and earlier writers chose rather different forms, with Proust, for instance, being different from Joyce, and so on.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: Using terminology developed by a particular author or in a specific context linked to the works studied (like 'autobiografiction', 'Mémoires imaginaires' a term coined by Marcel Duhamel, or 'antimémoires', invented by André Malraux) seems to me the best way to avoid anachronism. This is why the choice made by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf to use 'autofiction' in the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* that she directed seems awkward to me, considering that this is a book written in English, where 'life-writing' is the norm, but that it focuses on autobiography – almost as if there were a form of schizophrenia between language and intellectual concepts. 'Autofiction' is a recent term, that no one, in France, can define. It was invented to be a hapax, a contradiction, and it is difficult to derive a general category from a contradiction… So, I found the choice of this term surprising for the title of a book which is otherwise fascinating.

Max Saunders: My sense is that 'autofiction' as Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf uses it is linked to the context of the publishing industry. There is such a plethora of autobiographical fiction out there that most fiction is that in some way now, so she is using 'autofiction' as an umbrella term for all of it.

Bruno Tribout: You mentioned 'Ego Media' as one of the recently completed projects hosted by the Centre for Life-Writing Research, and I was wondering if you could tell us more about it.

Max Saunders: The project is completed in the sense that the grant ended and the research was completed, but we are still writing it up; we are producing a digital publication, which is currently going through its second stage of reviews with the publishers. It was a five-year European Research Council Advanced Grant project to look at self-presentation online. It came precisely out of our sense that one of the most interesting things happening in life-writing was the shift online, in the way that it challenged lots of theoretical ideas about life-writing. It was a very multidisciplinary project, with people not just in English, like Clare and I, but in Sociolinguistics, Neurology, Medicine, and Games studies. Some contributors were looking at Medical Humanities areas, like epilepsy, and the way some patient groups suffering from it used the internet to talk about their experiences. Other researchers looked at chat bots, automated agents who talk to you and sometimes do impression of people doing life-writing, which I think is fascinating in the sense that one of the many ways in which we might have reached a point of existential threat or challenge to ourselves as life-writers is that we may not always be able to tell whether the communications that we get are from humans or not. So that was one area we were looking at, but like the Centre itself, it was a very diverse project, which was investigating different areas of self-presentation online among people for whom this is an absolutely fundamental experience and also among generations who are not digital natives and may still be struggling with the technology. We worked with the Mass Observation archive in Sussex, which Clare mentioned earlier, to do a study on people's online habits, looking at different generations using the technology for presenting themselves.

Bruno Tribout: How did you envisage your primary sources in terms of the range of material and forms potentially available?

Max Saunders: It was obvious from very early on that we couldn't be totalising about it, and therefore we couldn't be categorical in the way we approached it. We were never going to come up with theoretical ideas that covered every form of online life-writing. There was no way we were even going to get to know what they all were in five years, so the method was very much qualitative rather than quantitative. We followed our instincts very often, looking for areas where we thought something interesting was going on, and this was often based on the researchers' own experience of using some of these platforms. So, one of the researchers who had experience with internet chat rooms wrote about those. Another did a project on mummy vlogs – mothers presenting their lives and their experiences of motherhood online by video log or vlog form. The researchers' own experience of using these media meant they had a good sense of what was important in them and what was interesting, and so that was governing the area they were

focusing on, but also the methodology and the research questions they were asking. For others, much less habitual users of these platforms than some of the younger people on the project, it was more a question of dipping in here and there, and following leads and things that seemed promising.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: So, did you join social media as part of the project?

Max Saunders: Absolutely, we had to in order to understand how these work. I did have some crisis moments, asking myself: do I really want to spend so many years looking at this stuff? But there were always interesting things to find out there. We were very lucky in the research team, I think. For instance, I have no experience playing online games, but I was really fascinated by what Robert Gallagher, the person who really was an expert in this area, was telling us about them, and the ways in which lots of life-writing material comes into them. He was able to develop a whole notion of what he calls digital subjectivities, as they are created and formed in roleplaying games. And, of course, this area is absolutely massive, with so much money and effort going into it that life-writing scholarship ignores it at its peril, I think.

Clare Brant: And sometimes these things are hiding in plain sight. For instance, things like Google Doodles are often biographical. For instance, it's the 300th birthday of somebody: how they construct biographical narratives for that person visually and textually is really interesting, I think, and we just swiftly pass it to the day's business, but there's a whole repertoire of life-writing considerations in things like that. So, in a way that was like dipping buckets in the ocean, we felt that symptomatically we could cover lots of different things, which together gave us a kind of snapshot picture. With all changes happening so fast, if we did it again, we would have different materials.

Max Saunders: Something that was happening when we started the project was that some of the big platforms, like Facebook and Instagram, were beginning to use autobiographical terminology about online forms: they were saying this is your life story or this is your timeline, and presenting a series of posts, tweets or images as some kind of life narrative. So, it seemed a good moment, from that point of view, to really pay attention to what life narrative meant in these media.

Jean-Louis Jeannelle: Do you see blogs and vlogs as a continuation of diaries from a generic point of view, or is there something radically new in them?

Clare Brant: I think it depends on the blogs. In Britain, there has been a manifestation of quite literary, plentifully illustrated vlogs, things like 'Spitalfields Life', which ironically became a book. Although the blog hangs on as a traditional genre, it has metamorphosed also into the vlog and other forms. So, there are old things and new things going on in it now. The author behind 'Spitalfields Life' writes about a particular area of London, Spitalfields. He is a rather mysterious figure, who has a mission to post an entry every day (it is all tied to the death of his father and there is some kind of atonement going on). He would write very beautifully about location, about local life, about local history, but as perceived by

him and his very particular aesthetic sensibility. It is beautifully done and rightly recognised as exceptional.

Max Saunders: He used the pseudonym of the Gentle Author, so no one knew who he was.

Clare Brant: We invited him to speak, but it was a bit difficult when we didn't know his name… He can be seen as an imaginative agent, one who brings imagination to reworking or reinventing forms, genres, discourses – and digital practices. For 'Ego Media', I wanted to tackle something theoretical, in the hope of adding useful ideas for life writing. 'Imaginative agency' turned out to be potentially huge, but possibly a way of indicating originality in a medium where reposting, recycling and appropriating are also norms. How do you distinguish, for instance, between bots and people, AI and people, animal artists and people? Or is it as productive to look at what they might have in common? I found some wonderful texts to work with including Luc Besson's film *Lucy* (2014) and Jennifer Hayley's play *The Nether* (2013). Both stage imagination through cyberbodies, which code imaginative capacities in particular ways.

Bruno Tribout: You mentioned discussions, as part of 'Ego Media', about the relevance of the term 'life narrative' when looking at self presentation online. Did you use narrative theory in the project? Did you find that it was challenged by the material considered?

Max Saunders: I am not sure we ever agreed on this really, because the person that was using narrative theory most was our sociolinguist, Alexandra Georgakopoulou, and she was very determined to go on using narrative theory, however small the narrative. She developed a really interesting methodology, which she calls 'small stories' research, which is precisely designed to cope with the very fragmentary forms of narrative that emerged from large friendship groups interacting on social media. She also talks about 'breaking news', where people are responding to the latest developments in one of their friends lives, so these things have the feel of news headlines or news reports, as it were, on the latest thing that has happened, rather than being the kind of elaborate temporal narrative that we think of when considering autobiography going back in time. For Alexandra, it didn't matter how micro the narrative was, it was still a narrative, whereas, for a modernist like me, I felt that what we were dealing with was a fragment, was something that was broken off from a narrative. I don't think we have resolved that quite, but we certainly agreed that what we were dealing with was getting smaller and smaller, and it was just the terminological question of what we call it.

Clare Brant: I wrote a piece on emojis, which are an absolute condensation of micro narratives.

Max Saunders: You had asked in the questions you sent before our conversation today about grand narratives that affect thinking about life-writing, and it strikes me that one of the grand narratives that we were always dealing with was the notion of digital transformation, the idea that the digital has changed everything, that nothing is going to be the same again and that we have to learn how

to relive our lives digitally. I suppose one of the really interesting things to emerge from 'Ego Media' was that that was both true and also untrue. We kept finding ways in which forms that were being advocated as if they were something new really weren't, and we could trace a genealogy for them back to pre-digital forms. Clare very modestly didn't mention in her last answer the incredible exhibition she curated called 'Dear Diary' ('Dear Diary: A Celebration of Diaries and their Digital Descendants', Inigo Rooms, Somerset House, London, 26 May-7 July 2017), which was focusing on this question of whether a diary really is the same thing anymore now that it also exists in the digital world. And the phrase she came up with, which I thought capture it really well, was the idea of 'digital descendants': things like blogs and vlogs can be seen as digital descendants of diary forms. What that stresses is the continuity as well as the differences, and I think we felt that we heard too much about the differences and not enough about continuities sometimes. For example, if you are talking about the multimedia affordances of Web 2.0 and the social media platforms that exist on it, it's often said that vlogs can incorporate all this multimedia material that you couldn't have in text. But, of course, someone like Clare who has worked on eighteenth-century letters and diaries was there to remind us that these things always had pictures in them (drawings, paintings or photographs in later versions) and often had objects in them too, like pressed flowers. The text was already multimedia, long before the advent of digital media. It was very salutary to be reminded of that sort of pre-history of multimediality. But, indeed, other things have changed, and one of the areas that our sociolinguist, Alexandra, worked on through the notion of 'breaking news', which really captures this very well, is the *interactivity* of digital media. That is something that is different. Certainly, with letters, you had respondents, you could have several letters exchanged in a day in the old postal systems, but it's not the same as broadcasting something simultaneously to hundreds of people and getting responses from lots of them, often in real time. And that quality is what Alex was trying to capture with some of her theoretical developments on 'breaking news' and 'small stories', for example.

Clare Brant: In addition to these projects, we could perhaps also mention in conclusion the Palgrave Studies in Life Writing series, of which Max and I are the editors, and that has a huge reach historically and geographically. In a sense, it has the Centre's fingerprints on it as well. Recently published titles include *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, edited by Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak (2017); *Women's Narratives and the Postmemory of Displacement in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Simona Mitroiu (2018); *Transnational Perspectives on Artists' Lives*, edited by Marleen Rensen and Christopher Wiley (2020); and Ana Belén Martínez García's *New Forms of Self-Narration: Young Women, Life Writing and Human Rights* (2020).

Bruno Tribout: Could you please give us an outline of 'Strandlines', an ongoing project hosted by the Centre for Life-Writing Research which you referred to at the start of our conversation?

Clare Brant: 'Strandlines' began because I looked out of the window of my office and wondered: Why is the Strand so unloved compared to other London streets? It seemed extraordinary given the significance of its location – joining the

City of London and the City of Westminster, and with a rich history of its own. We first got funding to build a digital community, which we did in partnership with representatives of local residents and the homeless. I made a Cabinet of Artists to create original works inspired by the Strand, and for the last while we have kept going on a shoestring to present stories, impressions, micro-histories and topical events relating to the Strand. Contributions can be text, image, multimedia. The website's tag line is 'Lives on the Strand: past, present and creative': I hoped that would allow history, life writing and arty things to coexist. 'Strandlines' also consciously echoes songlines. 'Strandlines' was itself a publication hub, but there is a fine article by Hope Wolf featuring conceptual analysis: '*Strandlines*: Eccentric Stories, Thoroughfare Poetics and the Future of the Archive' in *Life Writing and Space*, edited by Eveline Kilian and Hope Wolf (2016).

Bruno Tribout: Earlier in our discussion, you mentioned that the *European Journal of Life Writing* published a *Festschrift* for Philippe Lejeune (vol. 7, 2018). How would you characterise the reception and legacy of Philippe Lejeune in the U.K.? Beyond *Le Pacte autobiographique*, what is the impact of his work on ordinary writing, on genetics and autobiography, on the history of the diary, or his reflections on online diaries?

Clare Brant: This is hard to answer! His influence circulates through the IABA. I think UK scholars certainly know *Le Pacte autobiographique*; the full appreciation of Lejeune's work might be hampered by limited translation. *On Diary* (translated in 2009) was essential reading for those up us putting together the 'Dear Diary' exhibition, and I took from it some quotations which featured on the show's walls. In terms of the internet, the 1990s era which Philippe was analysing has perhaps yet to have full attention?

Bruno Tribout: Beyond the example of Lejeune, in your opinion, what are the European works on life writing which have enjoyed the widest reception in the U.K., and why?

Clare Brant: Gaston Bachelard! Expansively poetic. Barthes, especially *Camera Lucida*, perhaps because of the work of John Berger (widely admired in UK), also on ways of seeing. Rudolf Dekker (after Jacques Presser) for his term 'ego documents' – more as something to work against than to adopt as a term in English. Reviewing an essay collection on ego documents edited by Dekker (*Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in its Social Context since the Middle Ages*, 2002), Jeanne Martha Perrault describes egodocuments (now all one word) as 'the stuff we have been calling life writing'; she indicates that autobiography is still the preferable term, at least for theoretical discussion (*Biography*, 26/3, 2003). Alfred Hornung, especially 'Ecology and Life Writing,' in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, edited by Hubert Zapf (2016).

Max Saunders: The presence of Barthes' essay 'The Death of the Author' has hovered over the field in an uncanny way. I've lost count of the number of talks that begin with a slightly embarrassed reference to it, or a joke about 'the life of the author'… I suppose there's a sense he has to be despatched before life writing work can begin. Though I've always found other work of his, like *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*

fascinating for its taking of the structuralist project right to the heart of life writing – as he also does in his own autobiography!

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