



« Defining a Field: *The Encyclopedia of Life Writing* »

Compte rendu par

Philippe LEJEUNE

De l'ouvrage

The Encyclopedia of Life Writing

Pour citer cet article

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In Autumn 2000 Fitzroy Dearborn will publish the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, the first large-scale reference work to tackle this subject area. The *Encyclopedia* will contain 800-plus large-format, double-column pages, and will include some 650 entries on the various forms of auto/biographical writing that constitute the field now known as "life writing". At present, there simply is no existing encyclopedia for the field. My personal motive for creating one has in part been to valorise as well as synthesise a body of writing that I have loved and worked in for the past twelve years, one that is obviously expanding and gaining increasing institutional recognition.¹ My hope is to create an encyclopedia that will be as flexible and interdisciplinary as the field itself, maintaining the anti-canonical spirit that has tempted so many into it. That is why it is titled the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* rather than of *Autobiography* or even *Auto/biography*.

It has taken just over a year for the *Encyclopedia* to develop from a proposed title to a drawer full of entries and a list of over 500 assignments to writers across the globe. In May 1998 I began to outline the book's contents, and search for specialists to act as advisers. Only four out of the thirty-six scholars I approached refused, and this was for reasons of time, not disagreement with the idea. The attitude of the leading names is that an encyclopedia for a relatively new field is a necessary research tool.

The initial design reflected my excitement about the international scope of such a project. I mapped out a rough literary geography of the world, using other encyclopedias as a guide, and identified genres and authors characteristic of each place. It was intriguing to consider British romantic autobiography in the same terms as ancient Hindu biography or *akhyayika*, American pioneer writing alongside Rwandan *ukwivuga*, the self-narrations of warrior heroes, as expressions of specific cultures. However I soon realised that this attempt to consider genre, period, style and theme only in terms of place obscured much that was cross-cultural, inter-disciplinary, or even trans-cultural. Eventually I developed five categories of entry that aim to allow different approaches and levels: Contexts and Criticism; Genres; Themes; National and Regional Trends and Traditions; and Writers and Works.

Contexts and Criticism

These entries set writing in social and academic contexts – an operation arguably even more crucial for life writing than for other genres, with its peculiar purchase on experience. Many currently hot topics in the field are represented here – ‘Computer technology’, ‘Memory’ and ‘The Body’ in *Life Writing*, for example – and I think these will make some of the most useful and original entries. Other ‘contextual’ entries represent the impact of different kinds of theory or discipline on life writing - anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, psychology, science, and

¹ In Britain, there are at least four university centres of Life History Research. In the U.S. this figure is many times greater. In the last year we have seen at least ten conferences on the topic, including ones in Italy, France, China and an extended panel at the Modern Languages Association conference. Now at least several hundred universities run courses on life writing, and many more incorporate autobiographical and biographical methods as well as texts into courses across the social sciences and humanities.

literature of course, with various schools of predominantly literary-based criticism represented, from 'Romanticism' to 'Feminism'. There is an obvious literary emphasis, but my rationale for this is that the book is concerned with life *writing* rather than life story. Yet some entries dealing with life story in other media were impossible to ignore, such as reminiscence, photography, painting and drawing, film and television. Finally this group of entries reflects life writing's deep-rooted historical function of advocacy and apology. In recent years much of the impetus for its growth has been through claims for visibility of groups oppressed or effaced from historical record. Hence the group of entries, 'Lesbian and Gay life writing' in addition to 'Sexuality and life writing', 'Working Class life writing' in addition to 'Social Class and Life Writing', 'Disability and Life Writing' in addition to 'The Body and Life Writing', and a number of categories of ethnic minority writing and women's writing.

Genres

Obviously essential was a group of entries representing the enormous number of sub-genres within life writing, particularly those that diverge from the standard public or published auto/biography, such as letters, case histories, obituaries and interviews. But this exercise of enumeration raises questions about the peculiar relationship that life writing has with theories of genre itself, in many ways challenging tidy classifications. The section is therefore mixed and fluid in how it conceives of the conventions of form. Sometimes the 'genre' is as much a question of context (such as 'Holocaust Writings' or 'Exile Narratives'); in others, the entry is an invitation to consider genre as a problem as much as a solution, as in the entries 'Autobiography and Drama', or 'Biography and Poetry'. A different 'type' of entry is defined around profession, such as 'Popular and Celebrity Autobiography'; 'Royal Biography', 'Scientific Autobiography' or 'Musical Autobiography'. These balance the many entries that reflect interior or psychological definitions of the life, which dominate the next section.

Themes

Once again, this group of entries gathers together definitions of content and form. There is no simple equation intended between for example, 'Authority', which is more of a structural question, and 'Repentance' or 'Motherhood', which are more truly thematic. Of course, I encourage the writers of these essays to treat both dimensions. It is arguable that the notion of definition around theme reflects an attempt to find universal preoccupations across culture and history. (Interesting exercise for readers: choose your own 30 recurring themes in life writing from different periods and places.) Yet there is no doubt that 'Conversion', 'Death', 'Success', 'Motivation' and 'Identity' itself, are points to which theorists repeatedly return as crucial to the psychology and structure of life writing. The religious origins of life narrative also pulsed through my design of this section, and alerted me to a possible bias towards my own Christian cultural context. Encouraged by advisers, I added entries other religions (including non-theist Confucianism and Buddhism) that should illuminate the debate over precisely the extent to which autobiography (as opposed to biography) expresses a particularly Judeo-Christian sensibility.

National and Regional Traditions and Trends

If the choices involved in designing the above sections were often excruciating, planning the coverage of writing by culture and place was positively political! As I have said, a geographical approach to life writing foregrounds the cultural relativity of its themes and functions, and encourages a refreshing ‘anthropological’ impartiality sometimes lost in the literary habit of judging aesthetic value. Yet whether to represent entries on the basis of country, region, continent, language (what about the many diasporic cultures?), and how to interpret the much greater visibility of life writing in the West, forced crude answers to questions that politicians themselves are unable to solve (the changing heading of the entry on the Balkan States is a case in point).

With these caveats, I consider that these survey entries will be some of the most useful to the book’s readers. National and cultural identity is one of the crucial determinants of life writing, particularly biographical genres, most literally expressed in the ubiquitous Dictionaries of National Biography. Life writing defined through preoccupations with place and community also provides the frame for such wide-ranging experiences as immigration, anti-colonialism or establishing identity as an ethnic minority, in addition to reflecting intellectual heritages such as the Italian Renaissance. Most importantly, entries such as ‘West and Central Africa: Francophone Survey’; Apartheid and Post-Apartheid writing and ‘Israel’ give coverage to non-Western perspectives and life writings – with limits, to which I shall return shortly.

Writers and Works

About half of the *Encyclopedia* entries consist of shorter pieces (750 words as opposed to 1,000, 1,500 or 2,500) dealing with single writers and works. While less theoretically interesting, these are essential to the book being of any use to readers. A reference book devoted to life writing that did not have entries on the major practitioners of its genres would strike many as a glaring omission. One of my repeated tasks has been to explain to contributors that the criteria for inclusion in this section is strictly a remarkable contribution to *life writing*, rather than to autobiographical fiction or simply having lived an extraordinary life. However I have taken into account the need to represent writers from a range of social constituencies across gender, race, class, region, disability, and sexuality. I have also included those known for exceptional diary, travel or letter writing, as well as autobiography and biography.

Problems and Challenges

Balancing, excluding, including: the dilemmas of these aspects of encyclopedia design are obvious. What to do when someone writes in alerting me to my grave omission of Hell’s Angels autobiography (on which the writer happens to be an expert...)! Or, harder, the suggestions made for Transsexual autobiography, Latvian Oral History, Suicide and Life Writing, Age Autobiography (new genre, term invented by the writer)? Cartoons and Life Writing. Identity as distinct from the Self. Sri Lankan Life Writing. It is easy to rationalise declining the offer of someone wanting to write about their grandfather’s war letters, but what about excluding whole countries that have been put together under a large umbrella of language or continent?

Much of the job has been to consider the merits of each claim, and come to a difficult compromise. It has become extremely clear to me that encyclopedias are by nature conservative beasts, and must to a large extent reflect the status quo of their domain. The proof of this is simply to imagine using such a book. Most readers would enjoy making a discovery en route, but be most frustrated if the landmarks and signposts were not there. Reference books are, after all, not read through like monographs; for the most part readers *look up* something they already have in mind. Furthermore, a reader wants to get there as quickly as possible – so the book will be in alphabetical order. This will not only streamline the search for a reference, but also present a humbler structure that will not invite impossible expectations of complete and entirely just coverage.

Anglo-American bias

The book's market will probably be two-thirds North American and much of the rationale for its design is to make it meaningful to its main body of English-language readers. Nevertheless the limits of an English-language editor and publisher and the dominance of the Western academy, must be acknowledged. As Wu Pei-Y has commented, 'Autobiography itself may not be, but autobiography as an academic discipline decidedly is, a unique product of the modern West' (Wu 1990: ix). It has proved particularly difficult to find suitably qualified writers to take on non-Western topics, although this in part reflects the material limits of contacting those who do not work by email and fax. In addition, the scope for specialist entries is more restricted for smaller or less established areas of scholarship, and I have been forced to encourage several non-Western contributors to generalise in ways that reflect the Western reader's needs. A proposal to write on Andean Testimony, for example, will become the entry on Indigenous Latin American life writing. A less obvious aspect of the Anglo-American bias is in the emphasis on *autobiographical* as opposed to *biographical* writers. This decision was made because so many biographies are well-known primarily for their subjects rather than their writers, and to include these would have widened the scope of the book so far as to threaten its principal aims. Yet the focus on autobiography, as an expression of institutionalised individualism, itself reflects a Western priority. Arguably, this is also true of the high profile of private forms of life writing such as the diary and letter.

Such linguistic and cultural lopsidedness is as inevitable as it is frustrating. Despite the totalistic pretension of the encyclopedic form, the only practical solution is to have complementary volumes produced in other parts of the world and in other languages.

Canon formation

There is a deep irony in the very concept of an Encyclopedia of Life Writing since as far as we can talk of a field as such, it has been characteristically suspicious of enclosing disciplinary boundaries and hierarchical models of knowledge or literary value. My sense of being engaged in a paradoxical exercise has been most obvious in the decisions over which writers are deemed to deserve entries to themselves. Shades of the Dictionary of National Biography and Who's Who return in such list-making: nineteenth-century models of life writing as history through the lives of 'great men' overlaying an earlier literal 'canon' of saints' lives. The ideology of 'canon-formation'

also haunts the project in terms of its restriction to writings that conform to an overt claim to authenticity. While much of the academic work in the field is still busy with assessing the fluid nature of textual 'truth' and deconstructing the boundaries between fiction, life writing and scholarly writing, I have had to draw a coarse line against works we could describe as 'autofiction' or those which are too playful with the 'autobiographical pact' (Lejeune, 1975). In terms of the sense of 'canon' as 'a list of the works of an author that are accepted as authentic', my criteria of texts with an explicit truth claim merges with now much contested notions of original authorship and the authoritative text.

It should be clear by now that I consider the tilt towards canon formation inevitable in such a project and on one level, simply part of an ongoing process of definition of the field. However, the book does proffer one specific point of reflexivity on this process, apart from the introduction that I will write, in Angela Jones' essay on 'Scholarship, Academia and Life Writing'. Jones observes that the growth of life writing studies in the academy over the last twenty years has been highly influenced by gender and cultural studies that insist on a democratic range of study and the connection between private with public domains. She perceives the recent turn to autobiography by academics themselves as similarly idealistic, in rejecting disembodied positions of 'authority', in favour of socially positioned and more diverse forms of argument. Her essay convincingly suggests that if life writing is being institutionalised as a field, it remains one with a radical social agenda.

Nevertheless, we must remain cautious about the conditions of academic recognition. First, we must not underestimate the tensions between the abstracting process inherent in scholarship and the experiential basis of life writing. Indeed, I am convinced that academics are in part so attracted to life writing because of the degree to which it resists abstraction. Second, we must be aware of the material conditions within which academics operate, in a system of ever-expanding fields with their own provenance, expertise and publication opportunities. Life writing, considered as a field, cannot be simply considered as the outpouring of finally liberated voices any more than confession itself, but rather a territory that is as much created as discovered by its analysts, archivists and publishers. Third, we must acknowledge the many other 'institutions' or social contexts in which life writing is 'defined' outside the academy, from the law to groups of amateur writers.

In conclusion, then, a stiff challenge lies in front of those, like myself, who still consider life writing to have a certain magic and pedagogical potential unmatched by either fictional or historical texts. This is to remain alert to the limits as well as benefits of academic and even intellectual definition and the ways in which life writing can interrupt it, enhance it, or even ignore it, much as Women's Studies has been doing over the last twenty years. In this understanding of a field as alive with non-academic as well as academic players, an *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* may then find its place.

More information about *The Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, including a complete list of entries, can be found at: <http://www.fitzroydearborn.com/london.htm/lifew.htm>

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